

Night

Historical Background—Auschwitz Concentration Camp

Although Auschwitz is best known as a Death Camp for Holocaust victims, it was built originally for a different purpose. As Hitler's dream of the Nazi takeover of Europe began to unfold, Auschwitz was to have been built to house Polish political prisoners, or anyone who was considered a threat to the German occupation of Poland. The Nazis wanted to make the Poles a nation of slaves. Rudolph Höss, Kommandant at Auschwitz who had worked in concentration camps since 1934, knew he needed to build a "terror to the Poles."

Because of the proximity to lime, water and coal, the main ingredients used in the manufacture of synthetic rubber and fuel for the war effort, the IG Farbenin Company was easily recruited to a location near the Auschwitz concentration camp. In addition, the camp would provide slave labor for their factories. Heinrich Himmler had visions of ethnic Germans living in the town of Auschwitz, a model German settlement, in accordance with the basic Nazi principles of *Lebensraum* (*living space*). Hitler believed that Eastern Europe must be conquered to give Germany more physical space which would allow for a greater population and new territory to supply raw materials and food.

Hitler's plan for Auschwitz was much further reaching. He had plans to invade Russia and exterminate large sections of the Soviet population. Within nine months of the invasion, three million Soviet prisoners were taken and two million were killed. One million were sent to Auschwitz to work.

Hitler blamed the Jews for losing WWI, and by spreading propaganda in the daily news, he encouraged the Germans to rise up against them. As the Jews began to arrive at Auschwitz, the Nazis felt no qualms about killing them because they hated them and believed the Jews had cheated the Germans and their families.

Himmler visited the Soviet Union, where he watched the Jews being executed—men, women, and children—shot in cold blood. He wanted a better way to kill them—one that was less traumatic for the murderers. A rather bizarre practice, the "euthanasia" of mentally and physically disabled adults was soon brought to Auschwitz. This "gassing" was such an efficient method of killing that it was soon used to dispose of unwanted prisoners. Because it was so expensive, the carbon monoxide that was used for euthanasia was replaced with Zyklon, a crystalline material also used to kill lice and vermin.

Adolf Eichmann, who organized the mass murder of the Jews, ordered a new rail built, terminating inside of Auschwitz-Birkenau, for easy movement of the prisoners. There were four crematoria with gas chambers attached to facilitate the extermination and disposal of great numbers of victims. The stench of burning bodies permeated the air for months on end. Kommandant Höss estimated that so many people would be exterminated that the crematoria alone would not suffice, so crematory pits were also dug at the sides of the roads. Sadly, his estimations were correct.

Also at Auschwitz were "standing cells," where many prisoners were crammed into one cell leaving only enough room to stand, and "starvation cells," where they were locked up until they died of starvation. The prisoners also knew that if they resisted or attempted to escape, their entire family would be tortured or murdered, so they made no attempt to resist. They often found themselves wishing, as they looked up at the aircraft overhead, that the planes would drop their bombs.

Because of the escape of a few Auschwitz prisoners and the Polish Underground, the Allies knew about the crematoria of Auschwitz and what they were used for. They would not, however, step forward to destroy them or the railways that led there, claiming their planes were needed elsewhere. The Americans did bomb the IG Farbenin factories nearby, however.

By the end of World War II, a total of ten million people had been murdered at Auschwitz and the other concentration camps. Six million were Jews.

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Exploring Expository Writing: Auschwitz

Directions: After reading the article about Auschwitz, answer the following questions in complete sentences. If you need more room, write your answers on a separate sheet of paper.

1. For what purpose was Auschwitz originally created? _____

2. How did IG Farbenin Company and Auschwitz cooperate together? _____

3. What happened at Auschwitz to the Soviet prisoners? _____

4. What was Himmler's role at Auschwitz? _____

5. How did Eichmann assist him? _____

6. What other horrific methods of torture and death were used at Auschwitz? _____

7. Why did the allies do nothing about the killing at Auschwitz? _____

8. What do you believe was the real reason that the allies did not do anything about what was happening to the Jews and all the other victims of the Holocaust? _____

