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Nazi Concentration Camps

“When three- to four-hundred people have been herded into this room, the doors are shut, and containers filled with the substances are dropped down into the pillars (...) they release particular substances that put the people to sleep in one minute. A few minutes later, (...) the corpses are loaded into elevators and brought up to the first floor, where ten large crematoria are located”(Holocaust Memorial Museum). And so was the cycle in the Nazi concentration camps, where over seven million people were exterminated on the basis of race, ability, and belief. The Nazi concentration camps represent a haunting chapter in human history, leaving an indelible mark on society due to the atrocities committed against millions of innocent lives. Established by the Nazi regime during World War II, these camps serve as chilling reminders of the horrors endured. This exploration delves into the context and description of the camps, examining their direct impacts during and immediately after the war, as well as their lasting generational consequences, underscoring their historical significance in shaping policies and attitudes around the world.

The Nazi concentration camps were a network of facilities specifically designed for the systematic imprisonment, torture, and extermination of targeted individuals, primarily Jews but also encompassing other marginalized groups. “Nazi beliefs categorized people by race, and Hitler used the word ‘Aryan’ for his idea of a ‘pure German race’.” However, the targeted extermination transcended race and extended to “‘undesirable elements,’ homosexual, disabled,

or ill” and political stance for “communists, political enemies, and resisters”(Holocaust Memorial Museum). Established under Adolf Hitler's regime, these camps emerged as part of the Nazis' genocidal "Final Solution" to rid the country of all non-Aryans and political opponents that threatened a unified rule. There were thousands of camps littered around Nazi conquered territory, strategically placed near railroads to ensure easy transportation of prisoners. The infamous Auschwitz-Birkenau, Dachau, and Buchenwald camps are among the most widely recognized examples, but the network included numerous others spread across German-occupied territories. Before the Nazis built these industrial facilities that could murder people at a genocidal level, they employed gas vans that redirected exhaust fumes into the holding trailer of the van. A former Nazi police recounts that “the driver presses the accelerator to the fullest extent. By doing that the persons to be executed suffer death from suffocation and not death by dozing off as was planned” (Untersturmfhrer). Over 700,000 people were killed in this way, but this gassing method was abandoned for three main reasons:

1. Killing was slow as victims took about 20 minutes to die
2. Drivers could hear the screams of victims which they found distracting and disturbing
3. The concentration camps proved to be more effective means of murder at higher scales and quicker cycles

The gas chambers, referred to as "Gaskammer" by the Nazis, utilized Zyklon B, a cyanide-based pesticide for extermination. Hans Stark, an SS member in charge of admissions at Auschwitz, recalls the process: "During a gassing, Zyklon B had to be poured through both openings of the gas chamber room simultaneously. Each transport consisted of 200-250 Jews, including men, women, and children"(Stark). Stark admits that he did not dare look into the chambers because

the victims' cries became unbearable as they realized the fate awaiting them. By the end of the war, around 6 million Jews had been killed atop an astounding 5 million prisoners of war.

The direct impacts of the Nazi concentration camps were harrowing and far-reaching. Millions of innocent lives were lost to mass killings, forced labor, malnutrition, disease, and medical experiments conducted by the Nazis. The Nazis used the concentration camps as centers of slave labor which was “achieved by the impressment and deportation of millions of persons into Germany for forced labor” and by the “imposition of conditions so inhuman that countless numbers perished.” This form of labor was needed because “of the fact that sufficient manpower was not voluntarily available for service inside the German Reich”(Frank). Tasks were often “pointless and humiliating” and were supported with inadequate equipment, clothing, or nourishment. For example, “emaciated prisoners were forced to run up 186 steps out of a stone quarry while carrying heavy boulders”(Holocaust Memorial Museum). Others in the camps were victims of brutal medical experiments that were performed unethically and without safeguards. These experiments can be grouped into three categories.

1. Experiments on military personnel

- a. These experiments were meant to increase the survival of Nazi forces on the battlefield and an example was where concentration camp prisoners were put into freezing experiments in efforts to find a treatment for hypothermia

2. Drug tests and treatments

- a. Many of the drug research programs involved treatments for illnesses endured by Nazis on the battlefield. For example, prisoners at Natzweiler

and Sachsenhausen concentration camps “were exposed to phosgene and mustard gas in order to test possible antidotes” (Holocaust Memorial Museum).

3. Experiments to further Nazi goals and ideologies

- a. At Auschwitz and Ravensbrück, prisoners underwent gruesome sterilization experiments to rid any lineage of people the Nazis deemed to be “racially or genetically undesirable” (Holocaust Memorial Museum).

Survivors endured profound physical and psychological trauma, their lives forever scarred by the atrocities they witnessed and experienced. In a study that included 12746 people who survived the Holocaust and a control group, it was found that Holocaust survivors had “poorer psychological well-being, more post-traumatic stress symptoms and more psychopathological symptoms” (Hamilton). The liberation of the camps by Allied forces uncovered the true extent of the horrors, shocking the world and shaping post-war attitudes towards human rights, justice, and accountability despite the Nazis’ efforts to cover up their war crimes. General Dwight Eisenhower describes the scene at Ohrdruf, the first concentration camp as “conditions of indescribable horror” (Holocaust Memorial Museum).

The generational impact of the Nazi concentration camps cannot be overstated. The survivors and their descendants bear the enduring trauma and inherited memories of their loved ones' suffering. These experiences have shaped subsequent generations, inspiring a commitment to remembrance, education, and the prevention of future atrocities. For example, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration was founded to start refugee centers and displaced persons camps to provide shelter for survivors that were migrating westward. The

Association of Holocaust Organizations has a directory of domestic and international organizations dedicated to Holocaust education, remembrance, and research. These organizations provide support to populations who were impacted by the concentration camps and they also serve to educate people about the atrocities. The Holocaust, with its concentration camps as potent symbols, has become an integral part of collective memory, serving as a solemn reminder of the consequences of hatred, bigotry, and unchecked power. Moreover, the historical significance of the Nazi concentration camps lies in their pivotal role in shaping international law, human rights, and the fight against genocide. The United Nations (UN) adopted the Genocide Convention in 1948, which defined genocide as an international crime and established a legal framework to prevent and punish its occurrence. This treaty played a crucial role in raising awareness about the gravity of genocide and obligating nations to take preventive measures. The Nuremberg Trials, which followed the war, established the principles of individual responsibility for crimes against humanity, setting a precedent for subsequent tribunals. The trials held generals and members of the Nazi party accountable for their actions. As Justice Robert H. Jackson explained, “The wrongs which we seek to condemn and punish have been so calculated, so malignant, and so devastating, that civilization cannot tolerate their being ignored, because it cannot survive their being repeated” (Malloryk). Moreover, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, proclaimed by the UN General Assembly in 1948, became a seminal document in safeguarding individual rights and freedoms. The memory of the concentration camps serves as a powerful testament to the importance of vigilance, tolerance, and the preservation of human dignity. The concentration camps also spawned a new wave of literature with books that recount the horrors of life during the Holocaust. For example, Anne Frank’s diary was published by her father after she was killed in a camp and it is still read around

the world today. "Maus," a graphic novel written by the son of a Auschwitz survivor helps delineate the struggles passed down through generations. Overall, the effects of the concentration camps are far reaching and still prominent today.

The Nazi concentration camps left an enormous mark on history, with profound direct and generational impacts. They serve as haunting reminders of the depths of human cruelty, forever etching the Holocaust into the collective memory and horror of humanity. The historical significance of these camps lies in their role in shaping post-war justice, international law, and the fight against genocide. As we reflect on this dark period, it is our duty to remember, learn, and ensure that the lessons of the past are never forgotten, fostering a world free from hate, discrimination, and mass atrocities. "I remember the hangings I remember the horror I remember the smoke of the chimney coming out from the crematoria I remember everything it left such a scar on my soul on my mind that the I could never ever forget" (NBC).

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