

Chapter 9

The Holocaust

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At the end of the 1920s German Jews were fully integrated into German society; many were prosperous, active in the fields of finance, culture and science and a number had joined the German army. By 1938, however, just five years after the rise to power of Hitler and the Nazi Party, they had been virtually totally excluded from German social and political life. In the face of the relentless persecution, many German Jews sought asylum abroad.

Through anti-Semitic newspapers, radio broadcasts, and other means of propaganda aimed at alienating the Jews, their lives were utterly transformed. In 1938, more than 17,000 Polish Jews living in Germany were arrested and deported to Poland, but Polish border guards sent the deportees back across the river which marked the boundary between the two countries. The stalemate continued for days, during which time the Jews were without food and shelter in the pouring rain. Eventually the Polish authorities set up a refugee camp for the Jewish deportees, but conditions were terrible and many tried to escape. Those who succeeded and made it back to Germany were shot. But this horrific episode was merely a prelude to what was to come.

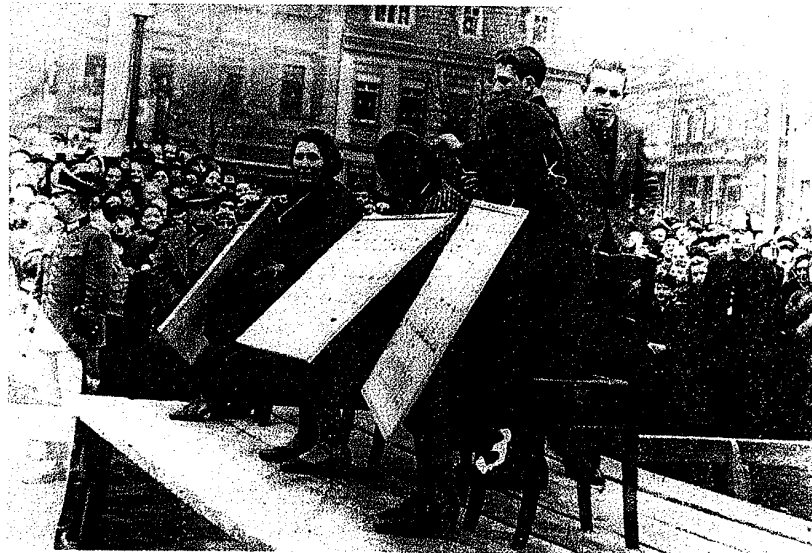
When the Third Secretary to the German Embassy in Paris, Ernst von Rath, was killed by a young Jew on 9 November 1938, the Nazis used his death as an excuse to



A young woman is ridiculed by members of the SA for her relationship with a Jew in 1935.

launch a pogrom against Jews living in Germany. *Kristallnacht*, the destruction of Jewish homes, businesses and synagogues instigated by Joseph Goebbels, took place on the night that von Rath died. Gauleiters, the SA and the SS were all involved in smashing and ransacking homes and businesses and their orders were specific: they were told not to harm any non-Jewish people, and not to destroy any property belonging to them. Armed with sledgehammers and axes, the perpetrators were intent on attacking Jews only. They also had orders to arrest young, healthy Jewish males. Around 200 Jews were killed or committed suicide on *Kristallnacht*, named for all the broken glass left in the streets in the aftermath of the attacks. Similar pogroms received enthusiastic encouragement from the Nazis and were the precursor to the later mass executions.

The Holocaust is the term used to describe the genocide of Jewish people and the killing of other groups



The persecution of the Jews continued after *Kristallnacht*. Here Jewish women are having their heads shaved and are forced to wear a sign which reads "I have been ostracized from the national community".

deemed inferior by the Nazis in Europe and North Africa throughout the war. To many, the Holocaust refers primarily to the Jewish genocide, of which *Kristallnacht* was the beginning. European Jews were the main target and approximately six million Jewish men, women and children were killed over five years. A further 220,000 Sinti and Roma people were also exterminated, along with millions of Russians, Slavs, homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Communists, Freemasons, Catholics and mentally and physically disabled people. Taking every minority group into account, it is estimated that between nine and eleven million people were killed during the Holocaust. This "Final Solution of the Jewish Question", as the Nazis called it, was carried out in stages, beginning with legislation to remove Jews from civil society. Later, those who had survived the ghettos and the appalling

conditions on the trains used to transport them to concentration camps were selected either to work as slave labourers, or to be killed immediately in gas chambers, the fate of the majority.

Every arm of Germany's sophisticated bureaucracy was involved in sending Jews and others to the camps. The Interior Ministry and individual parishes identified those of Jewish heritage while the post office delivered deportation and other orders. Jewish property was confiscated and businesses discredited and fired all known Jewish workers. Throughout the Holocaust, meticulous records were kept. The German transport authorities ensured that those sent to the camps reached their destinations; German companies tendered to build the

A mass execution being carried out near Sniatyn by a German *sonderkommando* (special unit).



Jews in the Drancy holding and transfer camp near Paris in 1941.



camp ovens, and pharmaceutical companies applied to test drugs on the inmates. At the camps all prisoners were forced to relinquish any personal property they had with them and all of it was put to use. At this stage, not one organization or institution in the world declared solidarity with the Jews.

Throughout Nazi-occupied Europe and beyond, the degradation and slaughter of the Jews was deliberate and systematic. Those in central and eastern Europe suffered the worst, but no Jew was safe, whether in France, Belgium, Greece, Yugoslavia, or the Netherlands. Anyone with three or four Jewish grandparents was killed without exception. Some German Jews managed to convert to other religions, but this option was not available to Jews in the countries which the Nazis occupied. The worst atrocities were the experiments carried out on concentration camp inmates, most notoriously by Dr Josef Mengele at Auschwitz. Even those victims who survived



French Jews selected for deportation wait at the Hospital Rothschild in Paris, 1943.

Rise & Fall of the Nazis

being frozen, placed in a pressure chamber, or being forced to undergo drug trials, were killed and dissected. Children were not spared this horror. In one experiment, Mengele attempted to change the colour of children's eyes by injecting them with chemicals. He also carried out amputations and other surgery without the use of anaesthetics. These painful, enforced, and almost invariably fatal experiments were intended in many cases to provide knowledge which would aid the survival of Axis military personnel. Some experiments were carried out to develop and test drugs and treatment methods with which to heal battlefield injuries and illnesses, while others were performed in the service of Nazi racist ideology. Dr Mengele, for example, had a particular interest in experimenting on twins. Conventionally, doctors are seen as healers and the saviours of mankind, but this was far from the case in the concentration camps. Rather than caring for and healing their "patients", Nazi doctors



An injured survivor of medical experiments carried out at Auschwitz.



A roll call of Hungarian Jews at Auschwitz in 1944.

deliberately and systematically degraded their victims before taking their lives. The "Angel of Death", as Mengele was known, was responsible for heinous genetic testing. As well as experimenting on twins, whom he would meticulously examine and measure from head to toe before beginning his experiments. Mengele was also on the look-out for people who suffered from dwarfism or any other unusual physical defects. Once Mengele had collected sufficient data from each pair of twins, they would be killed by an injection of chloroform into the heart. This was done so that each twin died at exactly the same moment. Once dead, the twins would be dissected



Hungarian Jews during the notorious "selection" to determine those fit to work and those to be killed, on the platform at Auschwitz-Birkenau in June 1944.

and their organs sent to research facilities. One set of twins, aged about four, were sewn together, back to back. With their wounds infected and oozing pus, and in excruciating pain, the children were killed by their mother to end their suffering with some chloroform that she had managed to lay her hands on. Older twins, aged about eighteen, also suffered at the hands of Mengele. Two Hungarian boys, described as "extremely athletic", having been washed

and examined, were X-rayed before having tubes forced up their noses and down into their lungs. A gas was then forced through the tubes forcing the twins to cough so violently that they had to be restrained. Sputum was then collected from their lungs and the twins were photographed over several days so that Mengele could examine their patterns of hair growth. Each twin would be forced to stand for hours, in great discomfort, so that the hair under their arms could be photographed. Each morning they would be woken early and made to sit in a vat of extremely hot water until they were on the point of passing out from the unbearable heat. They were then strapped to tables so that their hair could be plucked out, the idea being to save the root from each hair. They were

A pile of shoes of murdered inmates found by Soviet troops who liberated Auschwitz in January 1945.





Children from the Lodz ghetto during their deportation to Chelmno extermination camp.

Perhaps the best known account of life as a Jew under the Nazi regime is that of Anne Frank. She kept a diary for more than two years as her family hid from the authorities in occupied Amsterdam. They were eventually betrayed and Anne was sent to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp where she died of typhus in March 1945.

Dit is een foto, zoals ik me zou wensen, altijd zo te zijn. Dan had ik nog wel een kans om naar Hollywood te komen.
 Anne Frank
 10 Oct. 1942



(translation)
 "This is a photo as I would wish myself to look all the time. Then I would maybe have a chance to come to Hollywood."
 Anne Frank, 10 Oct. 1942

forced back into the hot vat several times until enough hair had been collected, following which they were shaved from head to toe. Both boys were then subjected to painful rectal and extensive lower gastric intestinal examinations, having received no anaesthetic, before receiving equally excruciating urological examinations. After three weeks of this kind of treatment, the twins were taken to the dissection laboratory where they were killed with injections into their hearts. Their bodies were then dissected and their organs sent to a research laboratory.

Other experiments were equally gruesome. Freezing and hypothermia experiments were carried out on male prisoners in order to gauge how German troops on the Eastern Front could better cope with the extremely harsh conditions in which they were fighting, for which they were ill-equipped. Thousands of troops died from hypothermia or were forced out of action by their debilitating injuries as a result of the bitterly cold conditions. Carried out at Birkenau, Dachau and

Auschwitz by Dr Sigmund Rascher, who reported directly to Himmler, the experiments were ordered by the Nazi High Command.

Inmates would be frozen to the point of death and then experiments would be performed on the best way to resuscitate them. Victims would be either forced into an icy vat of water or stripped naked and left outside in sub-zero temperatures strapped to a stretcher. The icy vat proved to be the quicker way to freeze prisoners, each of whom was stripped naked before having an insulated probe inserted in his or her rectum. On average, victims died when their body temperature dropped to around 25 degrees Celsius, having first lost consciousness.

Resuscitation proved no less painful. Victims were either placed under sun lamps so hot they burned the skin, or had blisteringly hot water forced into their stomachs, bladders, and intestines through irrigation, a method which usually resulted in death. Other resuscitation methods included placing the victim in a warm bath and slowly raising the temperature. If this was done too quickly, however, the victim died. Rascher also devised a fourth method of resuscitation on the instructions of Himmler: women were forced to have sexual intercourse with victims, a method which had some degree of success.

Creating a perfect Nordic or Aryan Race was fundamental to the Nazi ideal, so genetic experiments were performed in pursuit of this goal. Blond hair and blue eyes were a prime requirement. Those who did not meet certain criteria were to be eliminated from society by genocide. Experiments were conducted to refine the "master race" and to determine the causes of any defects. Some prisoners were sterilized in experiments aimed at

determining the best way to perform the mass sterilization of Jews and other groups. Various techniques, making use of X-rays, surgery and drugs were used. Some of the chemicals injected into victims had side effects such as internal bleeding and abdominal pain. Victims were not told what was being done to them, or why. Shortly after filling out a form they would find themselves subjected to radiation or toxic chemicals. Radiation was found to be an effective form of sterilization, though those experimented on suffered terrible burns.

Other experiments had military implications. In Dachau, doctors conducted high-altitude experiments by using a low-pressure chamber to determine at what altitude German pilots and crew could safely parachute from their aircraft, while in Ravensbrück, bone-grafting experiments were carried out. In Natzweiler and Sachsenhausen, prisoners were deliberately injured and exposed to phosgene and mustard gas so that doctors could experiment with different antidotes. Investigations into various forms of poisons and their effects were carried out on inmates. Some had poisons administered via their food, while others were shot with poisonous bullets, both methods resulting in excruciating pain. In other cases, victims were killed immediately after poison had been administered so that autopsies could take place immediately.

When the barbaric acts of the "doctors" in the camps came to light following the Holocaust the world at large was shocked. While many of the doctors and their staff escaped punishment in the so-called "Doctors Trial" at Nuremberg, and lived out their lives unhindered after the war, some of those responsible were later hunted, and, in



A female prisoner facing execution in Belzec camp, Poland.

some cases, found, by Jewish organizations seeking justice.

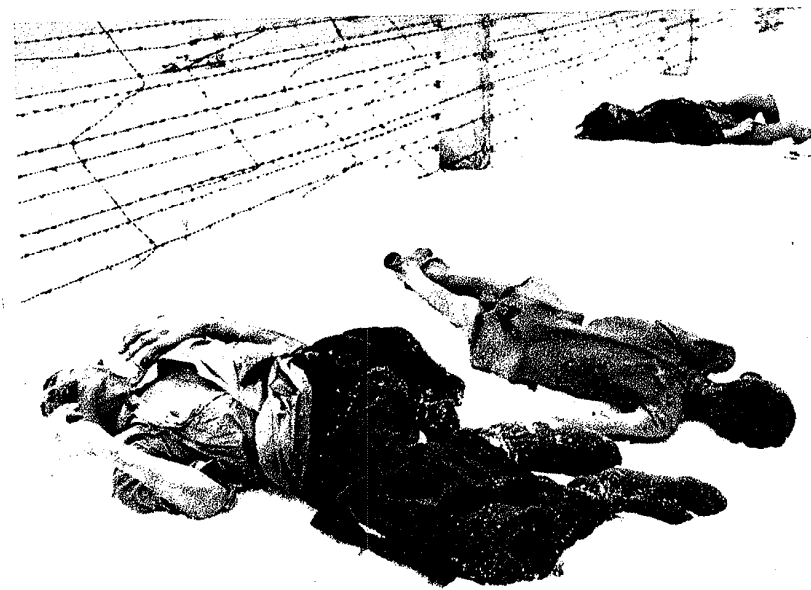
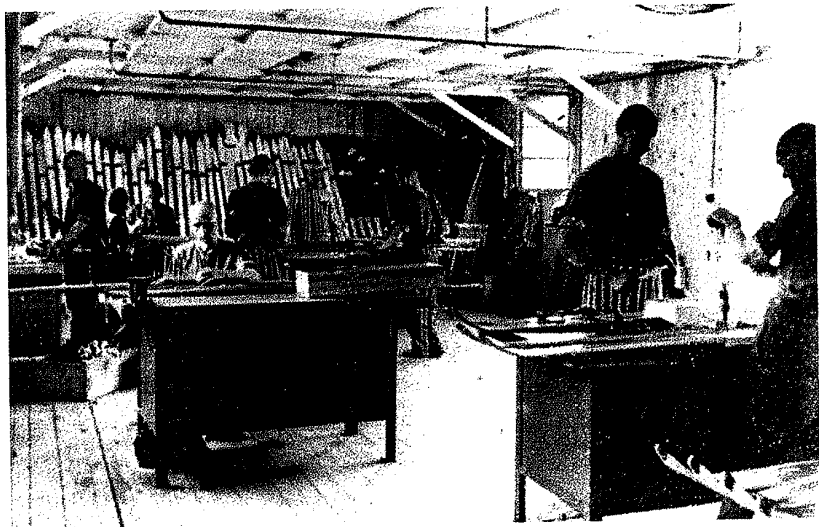
The largest concentration and extermination camp was Auschwitz, located about 286 kilometres from Warsaw and fifty kilometres west of Krakow in Poland. The camp commander, who reported directly to Himmler's SS was Rudolf Hoess. Auschwitz I, the site of the original camp was the administrative centre, while Auschwitz II, also known as Birkenau, was developed later as a purpose-built extermination camp, while a third, Monowitz, was a work camp. Those who were sent to Birkenau, ninety per cent of them European Jews, were killed almost immediately with the use of Zyklon B gas. Of those not killed immediately, many soon died from forced labour, starvation, disease, execution, and medical experiments.

Auschwitz I was established in May 1940 on the site of a former Polish army barracks. A month later it received its first inmates, 728 Polish prisoners. Initially it was used to detain intellectuals, resistance members, Soviet POWs, and

homosexuals, forty-eight of whom were interned there at one stage. Once Jews began to be sent to Auschwitz, at any one time it would house around 13,000 to 16,000 prisoners. Different categories of prisoners were distinguished from each other by marks on their clothes. German prisoners, for example, enjoyed certain privileges in return for which they were expected to supervise other prisoners and help to maintain order – such prisoners were known as *kapos*. Jews, on the other hand, were singled out for treatment even harsher than that meted out to other inmates.

The work was backbreaking and the punishments for infractions cruel. Inmates who broke a rule might be punished by being forced into “standing cells,” four to a room no bigger than one and a half metres square. Having been compelled to spend all night on their feet, the inmates would then have to return to work the next day. There were also starvation cells in which prisoners were

Prisoners at Dachau concentration camp doing forced labour in 1943.



deprived of food and water and simply left to die, and alongside the starvation cells, in the basement of the punishment block, were the so-called “dark cells.” Each one was fitted with a solid door and only a tiny window. Prisoners held in these cells would slowly suffocate as they used up the available oxygen. SS guards would also often light candles to use up the oxygen more quickly. Prisoners would also be hung from their wrists with their hands behind their backs in an excruciatingly painful position intended to dislocate the shoulders. Some inmates were left like this for hours, or even days.

Executions were carried out at Auschwitz in a yard specifically designed for the purpose. Prisoners were either shot, or suspended from hooks. Then, in 1941, the

Bodies of prisoners lie in the snow at Auschwitz.



Prisoners pull Hans Bonarevitz on a handcart to his execution at Mauthausen concentration camp in July 1942. Prisoners who attempted to escape were often led to their execution by a band, often playing the light-hearted melody "All The Little Birds Are Already Here."



The entrance to Theresienstadt camp. The lettering above the gate reads "Work Brings Freedom".

first poison gas tests were carried out using cyanide. More than 800 Poles and 600 Soviet POWs were killed in the first experiment with gas on 3 September. The gas used, Zyklon B, proved to be successful on a massive scale and a bunker was specially converted so that more exterminations could be carried out in this way. An enormous crematorium was built next door in which to burn the victims' bodies. Some prisoners were selected to join *sonderkommandos* (special units) to run the gas chamber and to work in the

crematorium. Part of their job was to ensure that victims undressed and kept moving into the gas chamber. Once the victims were dead, the *sonderkommandos* were responsible for removing the bodies from the chambers and taking them to the large furnaces. In March 1942, the first women prisoners were taken to Auschwitz, and the first sterilization experiments were carried out, in many cases involving the injection of caustic chemicals directly into the uterus. A painful death was the usual result, either shortly after or while the victim was being experimented on. As well as performing genetic experiments, Mengele also carried out castrations without anaesthetic.

At this time, the main camp was becoming crowded and more accommodation was needed so Auschwitz II, or Birkenau, was built. The effectiveness of gas chambers had been proved and it was decided that Auschwitz II would become the main extermination centre, as well as providing more accommodation for ever greater numbers of prisoners. There were four gas chambers in Birkenau, each one considerably larger than the original chamber. They were designed to look like enormous shower rooms in order to deceive unsuspecting new arrivals into being co-operative. By now, prisoners were arriving at Auschwitz on a daily basis by freight train. New arrivals would be divided into four different groups. The first, usually about three quarters of each group of new arrivals, were destined for the gas chambers more or less immediately. This group included all children and women with children, the elderly, and anyone who appeared unfit. More than 20,000 people could be murdered and their bodies burned in a single day. In fact, the highest figure for a single day was 24,000.

The second group comprised those who appeared fit enough to work. Between the camp's opening and its liberation in 1945, it is estimated that 400,000 people worked as slave labourers. Some Jewish workers were saved by German industrialist Oskar Schindler. Although a member of the Nazi Party, Schindler attempted to save as many Jews as he could. He called his Jewish workers "his children" and was instrumental in saving the lives of more than 1,100 Polish Jews, who would otherwise almost certainly have died in Auschwitz. He did this by convincing the SS that the workers were indispensable to his factory.

People in the third group were destined to be experimented on by Dr Josef Mengele. This group comprised twins, anyone with dwarfism, and anyone with an unusual physical appearance. Their fate was to experience excruciating pain while being experimented on before being killed.

The fourth group comprised women who were made to work in what was known as "Canada," the building in Birkenau in which the belongings of dead inmates were sorted. The building was called "Canada" because Poles who had gone to Canada were renowned for sending back exquisite and expensive gifts.

Despite the terrible conditions and great danger in Auschwitz where violating any rule or regulation meant certain death, there was some resistance within the camp. By 1943 a movement had developed which succeeded in helping a few prisoners to escape. One of those brave escapees was the scientist, Rudolf Vrba, who was able to tell the world what was really happening in the concentration camps as opposed to the misinformation

disseminated by the Nazis. At Theresienstadt concentration camp (also known as Terezin) which was located in what is now the Czech Republic, the Nazis allowed the Red Cross to visit in 1944 in order to dispel rumours of extermination camps. But things were carefully arranged to deceive the visitors.

Terezin was terribly overcrowded, so, before the Red Cross visit, many of the inmates were transferred to Auschwitz. To convince the Red Cross delegation, which was led by E Juel-Henningsen, the head doctor at the Danish Ministry of Health, and Franz Hvass, an official in the Danish Foreign Ministry, that the Jews in Terezin were being well treated, fake shops and cafés were erected in the camp. The cells were given a fresh coat of paint and there were no more than three inmates to a room.

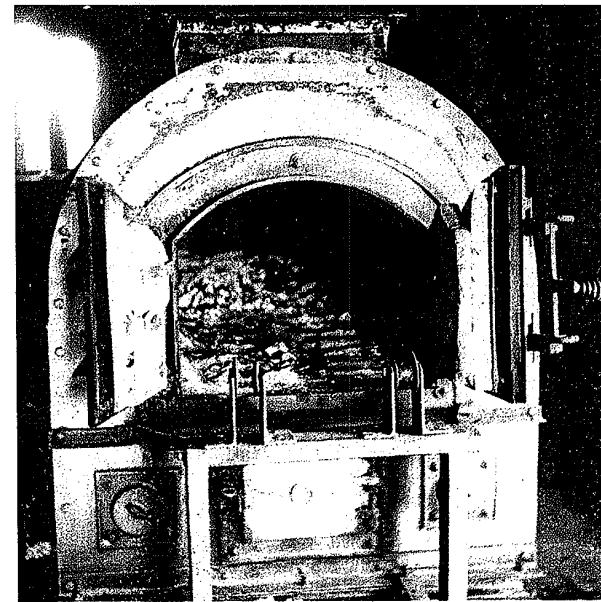
The Red Cross delegation was also treated to a performance of a children's opera, *Brundibár*, composed by Hans Krasa, an inmate of the camp. Krasa had originally written the opera for a competition held by the Czech government, but political unrest had caused the event to be cancelled. The opera was first performed by children living in an orphanage in Prague which had become a temporary school for children who had become separated from their parents because of the war. Krasa and many of the children in the orphanage were later transported to the camp where they were reunited. The Czech composer reworked the opera to make use of the instruments available in the camp and it had been performed fifty-five times before the special performance for the Red Cross delegation. Krasa was later executed in Auschwitz.

With the prisoners having been coerced into playing along with the Nazi ruse, the Red Cross delegation was

completely hoodwinked into believing that life in the camps was exactly as the Nazis had portrayed it. Indeed, so successful was the hoax that the Nazis began production of a propaganda film that same year. Devised as a way to show how well the Jews were being treated under the Nazis, the film was directed by Kurt Gerron, a former director and actor who had appeared with Marlene Dietrich in *The Blue Angel*. Gerron was himself a prisoner who was transported, along with most of the rest of the cast, to Auschwitz as soon as the film had been completed.

Dachau, established by the National Socialist German Workers Party on 22 March 1933, was the first concentration camp to open, and served as a model for all subsequent concentration camps. It was divided into two parts, one of which contained its thirty-two barracks, and another which housed the crematorium. One barracks housed clergy who had opposed the Nazi regime, including bishops, deacons and priests – it is estimated that around 3,000 religious prisoners were held there. Another was used for experiments on prisoners. A large courtyard served as an area for executions. Between 1937 and 1938, prisoners were forced to rebuild the camp, after which it remained largely unchanged until its liberation on 29 April 1945. The camp was consistently overcrowded and conditions were particularly inhumane.

Although the camp had no gas chambers, conditions at Bergen-Belsen concentration camp were so appalling that the average life expectancy of inmates was only about nine months. Terrible overcrowding meant that many inmates succumbed to disease, including the young diarist Anne Frank who died there in March 1945, of typhus, just a few weeks before the camp was liberated by the British Army.



The furnace at Bergen-Belsen used to cremate bodies.

By mid-1944 the Nazi's "final solution" had gone a long way towards achieving its objective with many Jewish communities having been exterminated. Majdanek was liberated by the Red Army in July that year, and Auschwitz six months later, in January 1945. US troops liberated Buchenwald in April and the British arrived at Bergen-Belsen the same month. Dachau was liberated by US troops, in April, on the same day that Soviet forces liberated Ravensbrück. The Allied liberators struggled to comprehend what they found. Many inmates had long since died, either executed or from exhaustion, hunger, and disease. Corpses lay unburied and those who had survived were malnourished and ill.

There is no generally agreed, precise figure for how many people died in the Nazi death camps. The figure of six million Jewish victims is often quoted, but the total number of victims was substantially higher than this. The

following estimates of the numbers of people who died have been made for the various camps:

Auschwitz	1,100,000
Belzec	600,000
Bergen-Belsen	35,000
Chelmno	320,000
Dachau	32,000
Gross-Rosen	40,000
Koldichevo	22,000
Majdanek	360,000
Mauthausen	120,000
Natzweiler/Struthof	12,000
Neuengamme	56,000
Plaszow	8,000
Sobibor	250,000
Stutthof	65,000
Theresienstadt	33,000
Total	3,053,000



The skulls of murdered prisoners are displayed following the liberation of Majdanek camp near Lublin, Poland, by units of the 1st White Russian Front on 24 July 1944.

Chapter 10

The defeat of Nazi Germany

As far back as 1943, there were signs that Nazi Germany was beginning to lose its grip on the war. Hitler had clearly underestimated the resilience of the Soviet Union, which, partly through sheer weight of numbers, had begun to push the German Army back and ultimately out of Soviet territory. The Germans had come tantalizingly close to capturing Moscow, but had not quite managed to breach Soviet defences. Hitler had also critically misjudged the situation in North Africa; had Rommel been allowed sufficient troops and equipment, he may well have succeeded in capturing Egypt and the oilfields beyond, but Hitler's focus on the Soviet Union had led to Rommel

There were factions within Germany which thought the country would be better off without Hitler. This is the scene of an assassination attempt on 20 July 1944 near Rastenburg – Goering and Bormann view the destruction.

