



Extermination Camps

(in German, *vernichtungslager*), Nazi camps located in occupied Poland with the sole purpose of murder of Jews. Altogether, some 3.5 million Jews perished in extermination camps as part of the “Final Solution.”

The Nazis began the systematic mass murder Jews with the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941. At first, hundreds of thousands of Jews were shot by *Einsatzgruppen* and other units. However, this method quickly proved inefficient enough by Nazi standards, and they began searching for other murder methods. Experiments with poison gas began shortly thereafter at Auschwitz and other camps. After observing the efficacy of poison gas as means of mass murder, Nazi leaders ordered the establishment of extermination camps, where gas would be used for the murder of Jews.

The extermination camps were constructed in the region of Poland occupied by Germany in 1939. They included the Birkenau (Auschwitz II) section of Auschwitz, Chelmno, Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka. Some experts also include Majdanek, with its 360,000 victims (see entry).

Chelmno was the first extermination camp to be established. Located near Lodz, it was put into operation on December 8, 1941, and ceased operation in the summer of 1944. Victims were murdered by gas vans; some 320,000 people were murdered there.

Auschwitz was both a concentration camp and an extermination camp. Its extermination section in Birkenau was instituted in March 1942, and finally closed in November 1944. During its two and a half years of operation, about one million Jews were murdered in the camp's gas chambers, which used Zyklon B gas. In addition, tens of thousands of gypsies and Soviet prisoners of war were also murdered there.

Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka were all set up in 1942 as a result of *aktion Reinhard*. Belzec was in operation from March to December 1942, during which time 600,000 Jews were murdered there; Sobibor operated from April 1942 to October 1943, with 250,000 victims; and Treblinka operated from July



1942 to August 1943, encompassing 870,000 murders. Those annihilated at these camps were suffocated by carbon monoxide gas.