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AUSCHWITZ

THE NAZIS & THE 'FINAL SOLUTION'

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BBC TWO UNRAVELS THE SECRETS OF AUSCHWITZ

Auschwitz has a unique place in history. It is where the largest mass murder ever recorded occurred. Yet it is hard to grasp how and why such a chilling place existed.

Now the untold story of Auschwitz is to be revealed in a definitive BBC series to mark the 60th anniversary of the liberation of the camp in January 2005.

Written and produced by BAFTA Award-winning producer Laurence Rees, and using new research, *Auschwitz: The Nazis & the 'Final Solution'* offers a unique perspective on the camp in which more than 1 million people were ruthlessly murdered.

The series follows the trail of evil from the origins of Auschwitz as a place to hold Polish political prisoners, through the Nazi solution for what they called 'the Jewish problem' to the development of the camp as a mechanised factory for mass murder. It interweaves new testimony from camp survivors and members of the SS with archive footage and drama reconstructions of some of the key decision-making moments. And for the first time on television, the buildings that made up Auschwitz-Birkenau are recreated from the original blueprints, using photo-real graphics.

"The name Auschwitz is quite rightly a byword for horror," says series producer Laurence Rees. "But the problem with thinking about horror is that we naturally turn away from it. Our series is not only

about the shocking, almost unimaginable pain of those who died, or survived, Auschwitz. It's about how the Nazis came to do what they did. I feel passionately that being horrified is not enough. We need to make an attempt to understand how and why such horrors happened if we are ever to be able to stop them occurring again."

The series is the result of three years of in-depth research, drawing on the close involvement of world experts on the period, including Professors Sir Ian Kershaw and David Cesarani. It is based on nearly 100 interviews with survivors and perpetrators, many of whom are speaking in detail for the first time. Sensitive shot drama sequences, filmed on location using German and Polish actors, bring recently discovered documents to life on screen, whilst specially commissioned computer images give a historically accurate view of Auschwitz-Birkenau at all its many stages. The computer-animated images are based on plans from the Auschwitz construction offices which were captured after the war, eye-witness testimony and aerial photos, and include the undressing room, the gas chamber and the oven room of one of the crematorium complexes, as well as illustrations of Himmler's vision for a new Germanised town of Auschwitz.

The BBC will be marking Holocaust Memorial Day (27 January 2005) with a number of other television and radio programmes, including a live event on the day, an international musical performance

in and around the museum of Auschwitz-Birkenau, and a documentary that traces one woman's story of survival seen through her grandson's eyes.

A BBC book written by Laurence Rees, *Auschwitz: The Nazis & the 'Final Solution'*, accompanies the series.

The WW2 People's War website at bbc.co.uk/ww2 is actively seeking memories and testimony from people involved in the liberation of camps and ghettos, or who knew or worked with refugees.

A history of the Holocaust can be found on bbc.co.uk/history.



ARBEIT MACHT FREI

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AUSCHWITZ – THE SERIES

PROGRAMME ONE SURPRISING BEGINNINGS

“I saw an SS man, a junior officer, walking around the gravel pit with a pistol in his hand... It was sadism. ‘You dogs! You damned communists!’ And from time to time he would direct the pistol downwards and shoot.”

Jerzy Bielecki, Polish political prisoner, Auschwitz

Auschwitz is the site of the largest mass murder in the history of the world – more than 1 million men, women and children were systematically killed there. Yet its genesis is surprising, because although the vast majority of its victims were Jews, it was not built to deal with what the Nazis called ‘the Jewish problem’ at all.

Based partly on documents and plans only discovered since the opening of archives in eastern Europe, ***Auschwitz: The Nazis & the ‘Final Solution’*** is the story of the evolution of the camp and the mentality of the Nazis who created and ran it.

In ***Surprising Beginnings***, camp commandant Rudolf Höss arrives in the Polish town of Oświęcim to create a new concentration camp, its role being to imprison and terrorise anyone who resists the Nazi occupation of Poland. Within 20 months more than half of the 23,000 Poles first sent to Auschwitz are dead. Yet despite its obvious brutality, Auschwitz is almost a backwater in Nazi-occupied Poland.

But Auschwitz is destined for more ambitious things. Its proximity to rich seams of coal, lime and a plentiful water

supply draws the interest of the giant German industrial conglomerate IG Farben. Soon SS-Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler agrees to a massive expansion of the camp to provide the necessary slave labour for synthetic rubber production, and ultimately for the creation of a new model German town.

Hitler’s and Himmler’s plans for the total ‘Germanification’ of the East gather momentum with the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, and soon hundreds of Soviet prisoners of war are arriving in Auschwitz. As the German army advances into the Soviet Union, Jews, including women and children, are ruthlessly executed by special SS killing squads.

But Himmler discovers that killing large numbers of people by firing squad is both bloody and psychologically damaging for many of his troops. A search is launched for a more efficient means of mass killing. An experiment using explosives to detonate groups of prisoners proves disastrous. In the end it is found that exhaust fumes from vehicles, if piped into confined spaces, kill those trapped inside.

In fact, the Nazis’ Adult Euthanasia Programme has been killing mentally ill and physically disabled people in Germany with carbon monoxide since the beginning of the war, but it is too expensive to transport the bottled gas to the East. However, a team from the euthanasia programme now visits Auschwitz to ‘clear’ the camp of those who cannot work.

Ironically, given what is to happen, there is nowhere in Auschwitz to kill them without disturbance. So the first prisoners to be gassed are transported back to the ‘old Reich’ in Germany to be murdered.

In autumn 1941, the first gassing experiments in Auschwitz itself take place, using Zyklon B, a powerful disinfectant used to delouse clothes. The experiment is carried out on Russian POWs and, after a shaky start, proves – from the Nazis’ point of view – to be the solution to the problem.

The journey towards the mechanised extermination of millions gathers pace.

Surprising Beginnings includes shocking testimony from Polish political prisoners speaking about the harshness of life in the early days of the camp; Jewish survivors of Nazi executions; and an SS member who was responsible for murdering Jews by firing squad.

PROGRAMME TWO ORDERS AND INITIATIVES

“I could see everything that was going on as though it was laid out in the palm of my hand. An SS man climbed onto the flat roof of the building, put on a gas mask, opened a hatch and dropped the powder in.”

Józef Paczyński, Polish political prisoner

Rudolf Höss is to claim later that he was just acting under orders. But like many involved in the ‘Final Solution’, he actually uses a lot of his own initiative in the killing process; never more so than in the search for more effective means of death.

In October 1941, the plans for the new camp extension at Auschwitz-Birkenau, already designed to house 100,000 people in the most terrible conditions, are altered to take even more inmates. But no more room is created to accommodate the additional 30,000 people. All that is changed is the number of prisoners expected to live in each block. Suffering is built into the very plans. Ten thousand Soviet prisoners are put to work building the extension. They are the victims of appalling brutality, singled out by the Nazis as ‘subhuman’ and beaten mercilessly.

By now many of Germany’s Jews are being sent to the Lodz Ghetto in Poland but, unknown to them, this is not to be their final destination. The Nazis involve the Jewish Ghetto leadership in Lodz in selecting those who are to be sent to Chelmno to be murdered in mobile gassing vans stationed there.

At Auschwitz, Höss is finding that large-scale murder has its complications. The crematorium only yards from his office has been used for gassings since the autumn of 1941. But the location is far from ideal for mass murder. The screams of the victims cannot be muffled, even by two loudly revving motorcycles deliberately posted outside the makeshift gas chamber. Höss, in consultation with his colleagues, now authorises the conversion of a peasant house – the Little Red House – in a remote part of Birkenau, where the killing can be more discreet.

By the summer of that year, Höss and his colleagues at Auschwitz have discovered how to murder thousands of people. But these improvised methods of killing cannot keep pace with the demands of the ‘Final Solution’, which dreams of eliminating many millions. The Nazis begin to scour the whole of Europe for more and more people to bring to Auschwitz and kill.

Orders and Initiatives hears disturbing testimonies from prisoners, including those who witnessed the first gassings at Auschwitz. And for the first time on television, there is an interview with a Slovak perpetrator who knowingly helped to send his Jewish compatriots to their deaths.

