

Author Biography

Cali Vance is a third year History major, minoring in Psychology and Anthropology/Geography. Her research passions are European colonization, environmental impacts caused by war and colonization, and how countries in Southeastern Asia relate to one another. Cali wants to pursue a career in the National Parks archives. In her free time, Cali loves to backpack and be outside, spend time with her friends and family, and continue to explore life.

The Selected Destruction of Concentration Camps: Why the Nazi Regime left Some Intact

by Cali Vance

Abstract

The Holocaust is a well-known phenomenon throughout the world. Something that is less known and less researched is the destruction of the concentration camps within the German empire. There were three main players in the aftermath of the concentration camps; the Nazi officials, the Allied forces, and the Soviets. The Nazi officials followed two paths, either destroying the camps or remaining in the camps until the liberating forces arrived. The liberators, such as the Allied forces and the Soviets, came across camps with prisoners still behind the barbed wire fences or camps that had been partially or fully abandoned and demolished. The choice the Nazis took in the fate of the concentration camps reveal that either the camp had an important function in the Final Solution and therefore had to be destroyed to lessen the retaliation from the liberating forces, or that the camp did not act as an extermination center and therefore could remain standing with people still there. Understanding the process of the Nazi officers reveals the importance of present-day tours of concentration camps and the impact that these sites presently have.

One of the most horrific places on Earth is shown as a tourist attraction where people are able to wander and explore the sites in which tens of thousands of humans died. There are thousands of papers, novels, and films elaborating on this incredibly complex subject due to the atrocities that occurred at these sites during the Holocaust. However, something that is not covered in depth is the German destruction of concentration camps, and the Soviets' and Allied forces' conjoined liberation of the camps. The liberation of the concentration camps provides several explanations for why the Nazi regime destroyed some camps. One is that they were ashamed that they were caught with mass execution sites; another is that they did not want the liberating forces to discover the camps and use mass extermination to further retaliate against the Nazi officials. The outcome of the con-

concentration camps not only greatly impacted the prisoners, but has created lasting effects on the Nazi regime and Germany as a whole.

Literature Review

This topic does not have a lot of research due to the complexity of the Holocaust and the lack of evidence about the camps. There is a considerable amount of writing about the Allies' liberation of concentration camps, but there is limited writing about why certain camps remained in operation as the liberating forces approached. Nor is there much about how the German forces deliberately destroyed parts of certain camps but allowed other camps to remain intact.

There is research about the impact that liberating forces had on prisoners' lives and the celebration that accompanied the liberations. In Tony Judt's book, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945*, he focuses on the downfall of Europe as a whole and the important economic and political changes.¹ He also discusses the treaties the belligerents signed at the end of the war. However, this book rarely mentions the concentration camps or the impact of liberating these sites. Another novel, *Jews, Germans, and Allies: Close Encounters in Occupied Germany*, written by Atina Grossmann, focuses on the reintegration of Jews in postwar Germany.² This is closer to the topic of destruction of concentration camps, but Grossman takes it one step further and discusses the issues that arise after the liberation and the fall of concentration camps. These are just two examples of thousands of novels written about the Holocaust. Both of these books cover vital issue to understand the Holocaust period and the consequences that ensued, however they do not touch on the actual dismantling or liberating of the concentration camps.

1 Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945*, New York: Penguin Press, 2005.

2 Atina Grossmann, *Jews, Germans, and Allies: close encounters in occupied Germany*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009.

Background of Camps

Before the Second World War commenced, there were German concentration camps standing. Originally made to house political prisoner, the German concentration camps were places where people died because of malnutrition and exposure to the environment, not from gas chambers and mass shootings.³ Though the Nazis did not explicitly intend these first camps to be extermination camps, they nonetheless became sites of death due to the horrible conditions. Initially the prisoners were “anyone who the Nazis declared to be an ‘enemy of the state’”.⁴ This list grew longer as the regime gained power and more citizens became non-German or impractical in the new Nazi regime. Originally “German Communist, Social Democrats and Socialist party members”⁵ comprised the list of outsiders and made up the majority of prisoners in the early concentration camps. The list grew to include “anyone thought unfit for a ‘healthy’ German society. These included homosexuals, the mentally ill, and those believed to be ‘asocial’ or ‘unnatural’ in any manner”.⁶ Due to “‘racial unfitnes,’ many of the early camp prisoners were Jewish or Roma (called Gypsies)”.⁷ The beginning of the concentration camps shows the initial goal of the Nazi regime: to separate anyone unfit to be a part of the new German state. This idea continued to grow with the party and morphed into extermination camps and an increase in concentration camps.

One camp that demonstrated this shift was Dachau, which became the model for the mass killing system. It had an “estimated 41,500 prisoners murdered there.

3 Anson Rabinbach, and Sander L. Gilman, *The Third Reich Sourcebook*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013, accessed January 31, 2018, ProQuest Ebook Central, page 340.

4 Amy Witherbee, “Chapter Two: Concentration Camps and Mass Murder,” *In Holocaust*, 2. n.p. Great Neck Publishing, 2017, *MAS Ultra-School Edition*, EBSCOhost (accessed February 21, 2018).

5 Witherbee, “Chapter Two: Concentration Camps and Mass Murder.”

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

Some went to the gas chambers, or were shot or beaten to death; others expired from exposure or starvation, or died subsequent to medical experiments conducted by SS doctors.”⁸ However Dachau was not always the well-functioning death machine that it became. Dachau was the first concentration camp the Nazis established in 1933.⁹ First used to house political prisoners and later a training facility for the SS, regarded as the security guards of the Nazi party, Dachau eventually became a site for executing the ‘Final Solution’.¹⁰

The development of the concentration camps reveals that the Nazi regime was becoming paranoid about resistance and claiming that certain people threatened the superiority of the German race. The Nazi officials increased the captures and murders of unfit people, mainly Jews, as the Second World War continued and the Germans started losing more battles. This system, designed to murder millions of people, eventually caught up with the Nazis when liberating forces entered concentration camps and discovered the truly horrific methods that Germany systematically implemented. It is unclear exactly why some concentration camps remained while others perished, but it is clear that, for whatever reason, these camps created a lasting effect on Germany.

Germany Not Destroying Camps

The liberating forces came across concentration camps left intact by the Nazi regime as they entered Germany. It was very clear that the Nazis had abandoned the camps in order to save themselves from Soviet or Allied persecution, leaving prisoners in terrible conditions. These prisoners lived in horrendous conditions: malnutrition, fatigue, and the general living conditions in the camps produced high death counts. Another cause of mass casualties was disease, which spread rampantly throughout the camps. The prisoners continued

8 Steve Friess, “A Liberator, But Never Free,” *New Republic* 246, no. 5 (June 2015): 12-2, *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 1, 2018).

9 Friess, “A Liberator, But Never Free.”

10 Ibid.

to die long after being abandoned by the Nazi forces because the diseases present while the Nazis utilized the camps remained after the Nazis deserted.¹¹ Nazis were able to abandon certain camps because these factors continued to kill the prisoners after the Germans left. These camps were then left fully functioning as the liberating forces approached. The Germans decided that certain camps were already destined to collapse, so going through the effort to dismantle or burn paperwork would not hide the conditions of these camps.

There were other reasons to abandon camps without destroying them. Nazi officers generally abandoned labor camps or concentration camps while prisoners awaited liberation, due to the amount of prisoners that died in these camps. The camps that retreating Nazi officials did not destroy had specific attributes. The United States liberating forces made a film about the Holzen concentration camp, which showed starving, dead, and dying prisoners still inside its fences.¹² This camp was not as influential in the overall process of the 'Final Solution' and therefore could be abandoned while prisoners were still in the camp. It also was not a killing center, so there was less fear of retaliation from the liberators if they found the camp with prisoners. This trend is seen with the camps that remained standing as the Nazi forces retreated.

Germany Destroying Camps

Due to Nazi shame or worry, there were several camps with specific sections destroyed prior to liberating forces arriving. One example of this is

11 "US Army liberation of concentration camps," Film ID: 2328, 1945, accessed at US Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of National Archives & Records Administration.

12 "German concentration camp in Holzen; destruction in German town," Film ID: 836, April 8, 1945, accessed at US Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of National Archives & Records Administration.

the Birkenau killing center, which the Germans bombed in January 1945.¹³ A photo of this camp reveals that the killing compounds were destroyed as the camp was prepared for liquidation.¹⁴ This indicates that the Nazis did not want liberating forces to discover the gas chambers used to eliminate thousands of Jews. There are two lenses in which this destruction is viewed: the Nazis did not want other nations to discover the large-scale murder sites due to the shameful confrontations that would surely follow, or the Nazis did not want further reasons for persecution to exist once Germany was defeated.

It is more likely that the Nazis did not want further persecution because not all death camps were destroyed and the international community knew the extent to which the Nazis were committing mass murder, as seen in the other camps being liberated. Another indication supporting the Nazi officials' hope to avoid further persecution was the burning of administrative records.¹⁵ The Soviets discovered the general layout and function of Birkenau as they entered the camp only days after the last death march left. However, specific details about the killings and daily tasks were destroyed as the Nazi's abandoned the camp.¹⁶

Soviets Finding and Liberating Camps

The Soviets liberated the vast majority of concentration camps in the east. The eastern side of the Nazi regime had several of the most atrocious camps because they were mostly extermination camps.¹⁷ There are several accounts of Soviet soldiers arriving at camps and being bewildered by what they saw

13 "Auschwitz II-Birkenau concentration camp barracks," accession Number: 2014.2.1. 1941 October-1945 January 18, accessed at US Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of National Archives & Records Administration.

14 "Auschwitz II-Birkenau concentration camp barracks."

15 Ibid.

16 "Auschwitz II-Birkenau concentration camp barracks."

17 "Concentration and Extermination Camps and Major 'Euthanasia' Centers," in Jeremy Noakes, ed., *Nazism, 1919, 1945*, Vol. 3: *Foreign Policy, War, and Racial Extermination*, Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1998.

because the Germans had tried to keep specific details secret. One account about the Lublin death camp mentions that “it was a true death camp, where they killed 1.5 million people.”¹⁸ This harsh realization made many Soviets angry toward the Nazis, adding to the already harsh Soviet punishments.

The liberating actions of the Soviet army are complex, with several different reactions and processes. Currently, there is not much research in this area, even by Russian historians, which makes it challenging to fully grasp the situation.¹⁹ It is still “unclear whether the Soviet government issued any orders to liberate the concentration camps” in the first place.²⁰ However, there is significant evidence that the government influenced how the soldiers reacted to the concentration camps. The Soviet political propaganda about the extermination camps encouraged the soldiers to act out of vengeance, which resulted in harsher retaliation in the east than the west.²¹ For instance, there was more looting, rape, and destruction on the eastern front than the western.²² A significant amount of camps that the Soviet forces liberated still had prisoners because the camps operated until the last possible moment. This indicated that the German officials were more concerned with continuing their mass killing than escaping Soviet retaliation. The Soviets liberated Madjanek and Auschwitz, two highly efficient execution camps, with prisoners still in the camps. The Soviet liberation of the most deadly camps was swift, and a vast territory to liberate meant that they saw both abandoned and functioning camps.

18 Anita Kondoyanidi, “The Liberating Experience: War Correspondents, Red Army Soldiers, and the Nazi Extermination Camps,” *Russian Review* 69, no.3 (July 2010): 438-462, *Historical Abstracts*, Ebscohost.

19 Kondoyanidi, “The Liberating Experience: War Correspondents, Red Army Soldiers, and the Nazi Extermination Camps.”

20 Ibid.

21 Kondoyanidi, “The Liberating Experience: War Correspondents, Red Army Soldiers, and the Nazi Extermination Camps.”

22 Christina Goeschel, “Suicide at the End of the Third Reich,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 41, no. 1 (2006): 153-73, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30036375>.

Allied Forces Finding and Liberating Camps

The Allied forces liberated the majority of concentration camps on the western side, consisting of Americans, British, French, and Canadian soldiers. The discoveries of camps by the liberating forces fueled their desires to conquer the Germans, and justified killing SS officers. One personal account of the camps being liberated stated that the American troops did not falter when killing the officers because, in their view, the officers deserved it based on the atrocities they had committed at the camps.²³ This was one of the greatest fears of the Nazi regime. They did not want to suffer under the Allied forces, so they abandoned most of the concentration camps and even destroyed parts of the camps to hide the amount of atrocities.

Another way that Allied forces reprimanded the Germans associated with prison, labor, or extermination camps was by looting and stealing from unoccupied homes.²⁴ This was more indicative of the Western forces entering Germany. Leipzig was a German concentration camp which was still occupied by German officers and provides an example of the difficulties liberating an occupied camp. This was a subset labor camp in Germany that continued to fight while the liberating forces approached. Just prior to the American troops arriving, there Germans set a building on fire with two hundred prisoners inside.²⁵ As the prisoners saw the Americans coming, they ran to the barbed wire fence, which was still activated, killing several of the prisoners. If the fence did not stop the fleeing prisoners, then the gunfire of the SS guards, who were still at the camp, did.²⁶ This example shows that German forces did not want to abandon camps that had evi-

23 Friess, "A Liberator, But Never Free."

24 Seth A. Givens, "Liberating the Germans: The US Army and Looting in Germany during the Second World War," *War In History* 21, no.1 (January 2014): 33-54, *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 1, 2018).

25 "War Crimes Commission: Leipzig and Penig Concentration Camps," Accession Number: 1994.119.1, 1945, accessed at US Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of National Archives & Records Administration.

26 War Crimes Commission: Leipzig and Penig Concentration Camps."

dence of mass killings. Even though this camp was not initially a death camp, towards the end there was a spree of mass killings, and this event caused the Germans to fear the discovery of the camp.²⁷

Present view of camps

What is truly shocking is the present day American view of the Nazi regime and the significance that the concentration camps hold. It is perplexing to hear people say that Germany's only lasting impact on the world was the Holocaust and that this devastating event is still impacting the nation. The opinion that all Germany is good for is cars and killing is becoming too frequent. Comments like this show that the discovery of the concentration camps reflects unnecessarily negatively on all Germans.

European governments have run into challenges when considering their part in the Holocaust. Historians have found that "they want to know but at the same time they do not want to dig too deep and discover what they do not want to hear."²⁸ There are different explanations and attitudes throughout European countries which have greatly impacted the "ways in which societies have come to terms with their own traumatic histories."²⁹ For example, France and Germany have very different reactions to the Holocaust: France does not allow censuses to count any distinct ethnic or religious group, and Germany has made it illegal to deny the Holocaust. These reactions stem from the creation, use, and destruction of the concentration camp system.

27 Ibid.

28 Victor J. Seidler, "Before and Beyond Auschwitz: Ethics, Memory, Citizenship and Belongings," *Psychotherapy & Politics International* 9, no.3 (October 2011): 232-247, *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed February 20, 2018).

29 Seidler, "Before and Beyond Auschwitz: Ethics, Memory, Citizenship and Belongings."

Conclusion

In looking at the destruction of concentration camps, the Nazi officials decided on two courses of action: to abandon camps that were not death camps, and leave the prisoners there or destroy areas in the camps that indicated that mass killings took place, such as crematoriums. Germany employed both of these options in an attempt to deter Allied and Soviet retaliation. There is ample literature on the liberation of the camps and how this impacts present-day Germany, although there is little research regarding why German soldiers destroyed some camps and left others standing. As the liberating forces came across places where thousands of people died, their views about Germany were shifted, which continues with tourists today. It is very difficult to use concentration and extermination camps for tourism without influencing the minds of the people who visit them, which can contribute to the lasting perception of Germany.

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