

# *The Holocaust*

Rudolf Hoess



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## **OVERVIEW**

The German Nazis killed 6 million Jews (as well as 6 million others including Communists, Poles, homosexuals, gypsies, and other civilians) during their reign of terror before and during World War II. Rudolf Hoess was at one time in charge of the notorious death camp at Auschwitz. He testified at the Nuremberg international war crimes trials and was later hanged by the Poles at Auschwitz. Excerpts from his testimony follow.

**GUIDED READING** As you read, consider the following questions:

- Why do you think the Nazis were told to carry out the “final solution” exterminations in secret?
  - What tone does Hoess use in his explanation?
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**T**he "Final Solution" of the Jewish question meant the complete extermination of all Jews in Europe. I was ordered to establish extermination facilities at Auschwitz in June 1941. At that time there were already in the General Government of Poland three other extermination camps: Belzec, Treblinka and Wolzek. . . .

I visited Treblinka to find out how they carried out their extermination. The camp commandant at Treblinka told me that he had liquidated 80,000 in the course of half a year. He was principally concerned with liquidating all the Jews from the Warsaw ghetto.

He used monoxide gas and I did not think that his methods were very efficient. So when I set up the extermination building at Auschwitz, I used Zyklon B, which was a crystallized prussic acid which we dropped into the death chamber from a small opening. It took from three to fifteen minutes to kill the people in the death chamber, depending upon climatic conditions.

We knew when the people were dead because their screaming stopped. We usually waited about a half hour before we opened the doors and removed the bodies. After the bodies were removed our special commandos took off the rings and extracted the gold from the teeth of the corpses.

Another improvement we made over Treblinka was that we built our gas chambers to accommodate 2,000 people at one time, whereas at Treblinka their ten gas chambers only accommodated 200 people each. . . .

We had two S.S. doctors on duty at Auschwitz to examine the incoming transports of prisoners. These would be marched by one of the doctors, who would make spot decisions as they walked by. Those who were fit to work were sent into the camp. Others were sent immediately to the extermination

plants. Children of tender years were invariably exterminated since by reason of their youth they were unable to work. . . .

Still another improvement we made over Treblinka was that at Treblinka the victims almost always knew that they were to be exterminated, while at Auschwitz we endeavored to fool the victims into thinking that they were to go through a delousing process. Of course, frequently they realized our true intentions and we sometimes had riots and difficulties. Very frequently women would hide their children under the clothes but of course when we found them we would send the children in to be exterminated.

We were required to carry out these exterminations in secrecy, but of course the foul and nauseating stench from the continuous burning of bodies permeated the entire area and all of the people living in the surrounding communities knew that exterminations were going on at Auschwitz.