The Nazi Death Marches, 1944-1945

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Introduction

Researchers seeking to comprehend the background and evolution of the Nazi genocide encounter a variety of difficulties, particularly when their focus relates to the final phases of the phenomenon. Indeed, considerable uncertainty surrounds the concentrated period of lethal violence near the end of the war, when hundreds of thousands of prisoners were evacuated from thousands of concentration camps and other incarceration and labor facilities along the retreat paths of the collapsing Reich. According to Nazi records, roughly 714,000 prisoners were languishing in the concentration-camp network in January 1945, a figure that does not reflect the unknown number of prisoners and forced laborers in other parts of the Nazi repression system, including private firms, prisoners of war, and others held in camps outside the concentration-camp grid. The inhabitants of this sinister web were distributed among hundreds of camps, large and small, that spanned the collapsing Nazi empire from the Rhine in the west to the banks of the Wisła in the east, and from the shores of the Baltic Sea in the north to the Danube in the south. They included members of nearly every European nationality but were united in having each arrived in his or her respective camp because of racial, political, religious, or social persecution. Four months later, however, when the tumult of the war in Europe had ceased and the Third Reich had tumbled off the stage of history, at least 250,000 of these prisoners were no longer present among the living, and many others would perish shortly after liberation because of their desperate physical condition. This final phase of the war was thus viciously murderous even by the horrifying standards of the Nazi genocide.

By the time the war entered these last months, the Nazi genocide was a publicly known fact. Its final phase, however—which lasted from the summer/autumn of 1944 until Germany’s surrender in May 1945—hardly reverberated in the free world’s press coverage and attracted little attention from the Hebrew press in Palestine. The British and American press also focused minimally on the concentration camps, let alone the evacuation and murder of prisoners, during this period. Media references to the evacuation of German-held prisoners from camps in the east nearly always mentioned only Allied war prisoners, whose fates commanded immeasurably greater interest than that of concentration-camp inmates. Only in April 1945 did reports about what had transpired in the concentration camps prior to liberation begin to proliferate, particularly after American troops reached the camps and discovered the atrocities that had preceded the evacuation. Their encounters with heaps of bullet-riddled, incinerated, and twisted corpses and with the walking skeletons who had survived, burst into the American press and into the public eye. This increased flow of information, however, was not necessarily accompanied by notable insights concerning the period of the death marches. In fact, the press did not use the term at all. The horrors that were revealed, some based on the first-hand stories of liberated prisoners, did more to establish the grisly character of Nazism in Western public opinion than it did to help generate an accurate understanding of the final paroxysms of the Nazi genocide as the war drew to a close.

Nor did references to the final months of the war and the evacuations at the Nuremberg trials improve public awareness of the death-march era and the massive scale of the murders surrounding it. The question of concentration-camp evacuations arose principally during the trial of Ernst Kaltenbrunner, Heydrich’s successor as chief of the Reich Central Security Office (Reichssicherheitshauptamt—RSHA). The entire legal debate, however, centered on questions related to administration and command, as the court sought to establish which officials were responsible for issuing orders and making decisions implemented during the camp-evacuation period.
and who was behind diabolical plans to murder prisoners in several concentration camps using explosions, poison, or aerial attacks before the arrival of liberating forces. Even in 1946, when the Allied occupation forces later conducted a series of trials against war criminals who had served in the concentration-camp constellation, the death marches tended to be treated as an isolated period in the Nazi genocide. When the evacuations were referred to, the prosecution’s primary emphasis was responsibility for the development of the chaotic conditions that had led to the deaths of thousands of camp prisoners. Naturally, of course, defendants passed responsibility up the ladder, particularly when a camp commander was among them.

The paltry extent of research devoted to the death-march period in the historiography of the Nazi genocide is puzzling given the wealth of survivor testimonies and other archival material available to researchers. Raul Hilberg devotes only a few pages to the matter of the evacuations, concentrating instead on the evacuation of Auschwitz that began in the autumn of 1944 and ended with the German withdrawal from the camp in January 1945 and the redistribution of the surviving prisoners among various other camps inside German territory. The sub-chapter that tells this story, entitled “Liquidation of the Killing Centers and the End of the Destruction Process,” is typical of the approach that prevailed for years toward the murders committed during the war’s final months. When the great extermination centers in the east were evacuated and destroyed, the murder apparatus that had typified the Final Solution was also eradicated and, in fact, this particular method of genocide ended. As a consequence, the murderous period immediately prior to liberation followed a different logic from the broader fundamentals of the Nazi genocide during its period of peak activity. Leni Yahil addresses the death-march period at greater length, noting the enormous growth of the number of camp inmates during the last year of the war due to the needs of the war economy, in which created a massive concentration of people who were uniformly viewed as enemies of the Reich. She sums up her discussion of the death marches by tracing the singular brutality of the period to a final effort on the part of a crumbling regime to settle scores with its victims and to avenge its impending defeat. Saul Friedländer’s book about the extermination years devotes only a few pages to the final months of the genocide, stressing the chaos that prevailed during the period and blaming the astronomical death toll during the evacuations on the fact that no one was completely in charge at the time. Gerald Reitlinger concurs with this conclusion in his pioneering book about the destruction of European Jews.

There is a possible explanation for the way in which the death-march period has become subsumed within the broader account of the apocalyptic collapse of the Third Reich. Various monographs on the history of the Nazi genocide cite chaos as the most significant explanatory factor for the final months. The extermination facilities had been decommissioned, the established murder bureaucracy had disintegrated, and the principal officials of the security police, the SD, and the extermination camps—for whom this activity was their primary occupation—were no longer at their posts during this disorganized period of murder and atrocity. For years, the death marches continued to be perceived as emblematic of the twilight era of the Third Reich as it sank toward its demise in violence, fire, and blood.

Alternative explanations proposed primarily by Israeli scholars have sought to link this savage era with the pre-1944 phases of the Final Solution. In the mid-1990s, however, Daniel Jonah Goldhagen proposed the most controversial analysis of the death marches within the context of the Final Solution policy. Goldhagen’s evocative and controversial book devotes two chapters to the death marches, which he considers to be one element in the spectrum of murder techniques employed by the Nazis to implement the Final Solution. According to Goldhagen, the death march had been a routine Nazi extermination technique against Jews from the earliest phases of the occupation of Poland and had been practiced during three specific periods.

As it happened, the chapters of Goldhagen’s book that related to the death marches were among those that provoked the greatest controversy. His discussion of several death marches, particularly one involving Jewish women prisoners from the Helmbrechts Camp, strongly emphasizes the convoy escorts’ grimly persistent ferocity. He summarizes his conclusions about the death-march era as
The German guards […] these ordinary Germans, knew that they were continuing the work that had begun and had been to a great extent already accomplished in the camp system and in other institutions of killing: To exterminate the Jewish people 10.

The German court’s conclusion about this particular death march underscores the main weakness of Goldhagen’s conclusions—the fact that the last victims of the Nazi genocide were not necessarily identified by their murderers as Jews:

The goal of the evacuation was unknown to [the prisoners] as well as to the members of the guarding group, except, that is to the accused. The accused saw in the prisoners not only enemies of the state, saboteurs, destroyers of the [German] people, anti-social and criminals, but consider them to be creatures whose humanity was hardly to be considered. Accordingly, it was all the same to him in his mind whether a matter concerned Jewesses on non-Jewesses, whether Poles, Czechs, Russians, Hungarians, French, Dutch, or members of other nations 11.

The population of camp prisoners at the time was highly heterogeneous and diverse, the product of the singular circumstances that prevailed during the war’s final years, when Jews represented only one major group among others. It is consequently problematic to interpret the period of the death marches exclusively as an outgrowth of the ideological infrastructure that led to the Final Solution. It is similarly problematic to perceive them solely as stemming from the historiography of the concentration camps. Although the victims of the evacuations and the death marches were camp prisoners, the savagery of the marches themselves transpired beyond the traditional fields of terror of the camps where, up to that point, the prisoners had lived and died. Indeed, the fates of the evacuated prisoners during the death marches--how they coped with the new circumstances and how they struggled for survival—need to be reframed as distinct stories from the narratives surrounding their internment in the camps.

Although the death marches involved a population of concentration camp prisoners and guards, the territorial location of the violence and the murder shifted, as did the nature and goals of the terror tactics employed. The death marches should be primarily conceived of as the terminal phase of the Nazi genocide and therefore as actions carried out against different groups of victims, defined by the killers according to various characteristics, that were annihilated in different places at different times. This perspective in turn requires an understanding of the decision-making process surrounding the murders, as well as the perpetrators’ motivations and the collective identities of the victims.

The Decision Makers

The earliest scholarly studies of the concentration camps date from the mid-1960s and were principally interested in the question of the responsibility of Himmler and his subordinates in devising the camp evacuation process and the attendant murders. For Martin Broszat, Himmler’s order to leave no living prisoners to fall into enemy hands was the principal cause of the panicky and murderous evacuation that sealed the fates of hundreds of thousands of prisoners 12. Himmler issued his celebrated order on on June 17, 1944 from the office of Richard Glücks, inspector-general of the concentration camps at WVHA (SS-Wirtschafts und Verwaltungshauptamt, SS Administration and Economy Main Office). According to the order, in the event of emergency conditions, the HSSPF
(Höherer SS-und Polizeiführer, district SS and police commander) was fully empowered to determine the fate of the camps that were under his jurisdiction, thus assuming responsibility for the military security of the district 13.

This order was issued amid the onslaught of vast Allied landings in France and the Red Army’s massive summer offensive toward the Baltic States and Poland. These factors prompted Himmler to order the evacuation of several camps in the areas of Kovno and Riga. Preparations for the evacuation of the enormous Majdanek concentration camp near Lublin had in fact begun earlier, in March 1944 14. After Himmler decided which officials would become responsible, the order was put into effect within a framework established and shaped by officials in the field, including the HSSPF, the Gauleiter and his staff, and the camp command. In this way decisional authority was delegated to local players to determine the timing of evacuations and to allocate the resources necessary for the camps under their responsibility 15.

At his trial, Oswald Pohl, who was responsible for the camps as head of the WVHA, claimed that the directives issued in the early summer of 1944 concerning the evacuation of camps and the transfer of executive powers to the local HSSPF had been given for operational reasons and did not signify a change of the official position with respect to the prisoners. As he expressed it, it was difficult to maintain regular communications and sustain the complex logistics of managing and supplying hundreds of far-flung Eastern camps from the IKL offices in Oranienburg, particularly given the situation on the front and the disruption of supply and communications lines 16. During the summer and autumn of 1944, the evacuation of prisoners from camps in the east towards concentration camps and industrial centers in Germany accelerated but was conducted in a relatively organized manner. The transfer of prisoners from Auschwitz to camps in Germany was a significant example of this phase of the evacuations. In mid-July 1944, the three main camps at Auschwitz contained 92,208 prisoners. By the time of the final evacuation on January 17, 1945, 67,000 prisoners remained 17. Similar evacuations of prisoners from remote camps in danger of falling into enemy hands took place during the summer and early autumn of 1944 in Majdanek, labor camps in the Baltic States, and the Natzweiler-Struthof concentration camp in Alsace 18. Although these evacuations were accompanied by significant hardship, suffering, and abuse, they were not characterized by the rampant brutality and atrocities associated with later death marches. For this reason, it is difficult to consider them a part of the final chapter of the Nazi genocide.

By the spring of 1945, however, camp evacuations and death marches were occurring on German soil. At this stage, the evacuees made their way through the very heart of the German population and entered a reality in which official systems of governance and infrastructure had ceased to function. Evidently, however, Himmler’s June 1944 order continued to provide the basis for decisions regarding camp evacuations, although it was augmented by additional guidelines. Max Pauly, commander of Neuengamme, told his interrogators after the war that in April 1945 he had met with the HSSPF of Hamburg for a final discussion covering topics such as the final evacuation of the camp and the disposition of prisoners who could not be evacuated 19. In April 1945, Pauly said, he found himself in a situation in which he did not know what to do with the prisoners. The commander of Buchenwald, Hermann Pister, made several conflicting decisions between April 2 and April 7, 1945, ranging from leaving the camp intact and turning it over to the Americans, or evacuating all of the prisoners, some of them, or only Jewish prisoners 20. The situation in nearly all the other camps was similar, as various officials issued confused guidelines. The commander of Ravensbrück, Fritz Suzhen, also received vague orders in early 1945 from Richard Glücks or the HSSPF concerning the evacuation of prisoners from the satellite camps that were his responsibility, but the matter of what to do with them and where to send them was not made clear 21. For the most part, camp commanders were not eager to take the initiative and decide what to do with prisoners, preferring to wait until the last moment in order to comprehend the essence of the order they had received, to determine whether the official who had issued it was empowered to do so, or whether they would be able to carry it out. The question of the source of authority remained ambiguous until the end of the war.
After the liberation of Buchenwald on April 11, 1945, there were reports of raids by released prisoners in nearby Weimar in which they had reportedly attacked civilians. In response, Himmler issued his famous order to the effect that under no circumstances should prisoners fall into enemy hands alive 22. This order, which came amid a state of total system collapse, widespread military defeat, and chaotic retreat, further amplified the dynamics of murder. The rationale behind the conflicting and varying decisions had become incomprehensible: Should the prisoners be liquidated to keep them out of enemy hands? Should they be transferred to other camps so that they could continue working? Should Jewish prisoners be taken care of? The practical solutions chosen were not exceptional in the context of the Nazi bureaucratic system. The unusual, serpentine path of the Führerbefehl was familiar throughout the Reich from other times and complicated situations. High-ranking SS officials were aware of the existence of a general directive that forbade leaving prisoners and POWs behind, and it is altogether possible that they construed it as an order to execute prisoners if there was a demonstrable risk that they could fall into enemy hands. The head of the RSHA, Ernst Kaltenbrunner, stated at his trial that he had been unaware of an explicit order from Hitler about the murder of camp prisoners, adding that in any case, the person empowered to issue such orders was Himmler 23. There is no evidence, in any event, that an explicit, comprehensive order to murder camp prisoners in the event that a camp could not be evacuated was ever issued. Instead, a combination of local instructions from various officials established the infrastructure for the slaughter. Joachim Neander defines these instructions as “local murder orders” (locale Vernichtungsbefehle), i.e., orders issued by low-ranking local commanders in response to specific needs or difficulties 24. Because lower-ranking officials were given such a broad mandate to resolve this issue, the decision to eliminate prisoners was transferred to the individuals who dealt directly with the prisoners, i.e., to the camp guards and staff who escorted them along the evacuation path. It was there that the prisoners’ fates were sealed.

The Murderers on the Spot

The death-march period has become part of the overall narrative of the apocalyptic collapse of the Third Reich. Various monographs on the history of the Nazi genocide cite the ensuing chaos as the principal explanation for the atmosphere during the final months of the Reich 25. By that time, the extermination facilities had been decommissioned, the traditional murder bureaucracy had fallen apart, and the key officers of the security police, the SD, and the extermination camps—for whom brutal actions were the principal occupation—were no longer at their posts during the months of chaotic slaughter. The death marches remained characteristic events of the twilight of the Third Reich as it subsided towards its demise into violence, fire, and blood.

As soon as the columns of prisoners began to wend their way towards the chosen destination, the evacuations turned into massacres. Once they left the camp, the prisoners were entirely under the authority of the guards and escorts who held the power to determine their fates. On the eve of the mass evacuations of the camps in the east in January 1945, 37,674 men and 3,508 women were serving in the constellation of camps. Some 80–90 percent of them were guards (Wachmannschaften who did not serve in the “professional” departments responsible for record keeping, administration, and organizing camp life. These also included laborers, clerical services, the medical department, and the political department (politische Abteilung), which was under the authority of the Gestapo 26. Most of these people had reached the camps during a period when the system was expanding, beginning in 1943 with the creation of hundreds of satellite camps and the expansion of labor programs. On May 9, 1944, Hitler issued an order allowing Himmler to mobilize military veterans nearing or past the age of forty—born in 1906 or earlier-- to staff concentration-camps. In the aftermath of this directive, after mid-1944 some 10,000 Wehrmacht soldiers who had returned from the Crimea, along with soldiers from air-defense teams, non-combat technical units of the Luftwaffe, and even the Navy, were reassigned to staff the concentration camps’ satellite camps 27. During this final phase, ethnic Germans (Volksdeutsche), as well as groups of Ukrainians, Latvians, Lithuanians, and certain other nationalities, were also called to serve in the camps.
It is clear from post-war convoy escorts’ accounts that they had been abandoned to their fate along with groups of exhausted prisoners who were hindering their ability to rapidly retreat from enemy troops threatening to advance towards them. From January 1945 until the end of the war, the escorts accompanied tens of thousands of marching prisoners over distances that sometimes added up to tens of kilometers, arranging appropriate overnight accommodations for thousands of prisoners, coping with the ravages of the weather and prisoners’ incessant attempts to escape. Guards and escorts often complained that they had been abandoned with the prisoners to fend for themselves under unendurable conditions. The guards and prisoners frequently reached railroad junctions where they were supposed to board trains to continue the evacuation journey to find that the trains were delayed or had been commandeered for military purposes, forcing them to continue now-directionless treks on foot. It is ultimately unsurprising that it became routine to simply eliminate prisoners who were having difficulty marching or were suspected of attempting to escape or causing problems. As the hardships of the evacuation and the danger of falling captive along with prisoners mounted, it was no longer adequate to dispose of prisoners who were stragglers or were attempting to escape. In many cases, the guards initiated killings of large groups of evacuees. The light trigger-finger was an overt manifestation of frustration, and a desire to eliminate anything that might prevent guards and escorts from rapidly distancing themselves from the fear of themselves falling prisoner.

Another group of killers whose professional field had little to do with the systematic liquidation of the Reich’s political or racial enemies, but who engaged in large-scale murder during the death-march period, consisted of members of the Volkssturm, the popular party militia that was comprised of older people who were unfit for ordinary military service, which was established in the autumn of 1944. The Volkssturmaínherited the hopeless task of attempting to stem the advance of the Allied armies at the local level 28.

One of the most gruesome massacres in which Volkssturm members played a role occurred during the evacuation of Hungarian-Jewish prisoners from a camp on the Austro-Hungarian border near the town of Eisenerz. A significant contingent of between 6,000 and 8,000 prisoners set out from Graz on April 4, 1945, passing through the area on April 7. The prisoners formed three columns under the members of the Volkssturm, the Gestapo, and a few Ukrainian Waffen-SS soldiers. The limited number of guards made it necessary to mobilize local Volkssturm units as escorts along the entire evacuation route 29. The lengthy procession made its way through the Präbichl Pass, an Alpine pass near Eisenerz that exited in the direction of Hieflau. The decision to murder the Jews, who were being marched towards Mauthausen, was apparently made by Otto Christandl, the Kreisleiter of Leoben District. The killers in this case were a group of inductees from a Volkssturm unit in Eisenerz, and their victims consisted of approximately 250 Jewish prisoners 30.

It is worth recalling that these killers operated under a unique reality. They were civilians mobilized for security service in the vicinity of their own homes. They had been unable to contribute significantly to the war effort against the Allies, and the real enemy, whom they regarded as a truly existential menace, consisted of the concentration-camp prisoners who circulated near their homes. The local press abounded with stories and rumors of rape and looting by camp prisoners who had been able to escape the evacuation convoys and grim warnings against offering to transport them 31. During the last weeks of the war, rumors intended to stir such fears found an attentive audience with a public that was starved for reliable information amid the total collapse of every official system. Rumors were enveloped in a dense fog of inaccuracy about the real identities of the strange, repulsive people who were crossing local citizens’ doorsteps. Social behavior influenced by rumors can act in various ways, one of which is the eruption of violence. This happens when the social order is ailing, vulnerable, or challenged. Wars, epidemics, riots, and the disruption of the familiar order are pernicious by nature and transform rumors into dangerous triggers of violence 32. This was the state of German society during these weeks, and that underlay the social infrastructure that created the conditions under which so many individuals joined the circle of killers of concentration-camp prisoners during the death march period. This peculiar pro-murder infrastructure, however, could not have existed in the absence of a general social consensus about the identities of the victims.
The Ideological Component

A racist, ideologically based consensus and the dehumanization of prisoners were salient components of the killers’ attitudes toward their charges. Innumerable examples illustrate this attitude towards death-march victims. For instance, in the town of Stary Jaromierz, Poland, some forty Jewish women prisoners who had been evacuated from a labor camp in Lower Silesia were brutally slaughtered on January 25, 1945. The group, who were evidently particularly exhausted and weak, was led into a forest near the town, cruelly removed from the carts in which they had been transported, dragged by the hair to several trenches nearby by the elderly guards in charge of them, and shot in the back of the neck. A Polish peasant recruited to drive one of the carts to the forest heard the killers counting the “pieces” (Stücke) they had already finished off. Some Jewish survivors of the slaughter who survived this death march reached Helmbrechts several weeks later.

Alfred Jespen, one of the individuals in charge of providing transportation, evacuated prisoners from Camp Wilhelmshaven, a satellite camp of Neuengamme. Approximately 200 prisoners perished during the evacuation, either from Allied aerial bombardment of the train or guards’ bullets. In his trial after the war, Jespen claimed that the prisoners whom he murdered or had ordered others to kill in the town of Lüneburg, where a large massacre of this group of prisoners took place, were in any case assumed to be half-dead. Ludwig Krenn, commander of the Volkssturm unit whose members slaughtered the Jewish prisoners near Eisenerz, told his unit in a “pep talk” a day before the murders that “These pigs and dogs deserve to get shot, all of them.” When the killers hunted for runaway prisoners in various locations, they lent their prey the macabre folkloric identity of rodents or rabbits. Survivors’ testimonies repeatedly assert that guards treated them like wild, dangerous dogs that had to be exterminated.

It is extraordinarily difficult to explain the magnitude of these episodes of slaughter without understanding the collective image of the victims through the eyes of the killers. The victims are definitively identified as the “other,” who is categorically opposed to “us,” a dichotomy with solid ideological underpinnings that serves as a foundation for the motivation to murder. Concentration-camp prisoners had been categorized as the “other” since the dawn of the Nazi era, and over the years, prisoners had increasingly acquired an image as a threatening, violent, law-breaking, dangerous group. By the time this mob from the east began to reach the camps in mid-1942, they had become ticking time bombs located within a stone’s throw of tranquil civilians’ homes. Beginning in the latter half of 1943, when the proliferation of satellite camps became a part of the German civilians’ daily lives of, the menace appeared all the more menacing.

Although concentration camp prisoners were the principal victims of Nazi violence after the first months of Nazi rule, no ethnic, political, or racial group of camp prisoners was ever singled out for total elimination. It is true that from 1944 onward, camp prisoners suffered high mortality rates when they were selectively worked to death, but even then there was still a narrow potential path towards salvation that depended on their ability to work and physical prowess. Once they had been evacuated from the camps as part of the death marches, however, this narrow pathway to survival became still more tenuous. Their collective identity as enemies, “aliens,” and “others” became far more threatening to the local inhabitants because no longer penned up behind fences and fled for their lives at every possible opportunity. Some of the killers continued to view them strictly as Jews, but others regarded them as communists and other narratives portrayed prisoners as criminals and rapists of women and children. At times, they were perceived as representing all of these threats combined.

The killers saw their victims through a lens of complete anonymity. As almost always happens in massacres in the midst of a genocidal process, the perpetrators regarded their victims as a group
devoid of individual human characteristics. In this situation, a helpless group of people is slain by another group that possesses the power and means to perpetrate a massacre with no risk to itself. One side acts, and the other side, the victims, can neither escape nor resist. The act is perpetrated by the killers against a specific group of people in a helpless, “hands up” posture. The event ends when the last victim is eradicated, when the perpetrators’ murderous rage passes, or when a more powerful agent disrupts the destruction. Numerous episodes during the terminal chapter of the Nazi genocide ended in one of these situations: The last prisoners were murdered, the demonic motivation that led to the act ended, or the Allied forces came too close to the site for the slaughter to be continued. Due to the diversity of the killers, their affiliation with varied and broad social groups, and the fact that they belonged to a range of different organizations and units, no attempt to trace a psychological common denominator among them could ever succeed. The killers included loyal Nazis, opportunists attempting to tread a thin line between the alternatives, the sort who simply wanted to return home safely before the Third Reich disintegrated completely, and undistinguished civilians who had stumbled into a situation that they had not anticipated in their wildest dreams. They had not decided to become Nazis in the beginning, but were initiated through their participation in systematic mass murder. They adopted the pattern of Nazi racial cruelty the instant that they decided to act within the Nazi spirit.

The ideological aspect of these killings can be neither concealed nor denied. The thousands of individuals responsible for murdering prisoners during death marches were not necessarily anti-Semites or systematic ideological racists implementing a well-defined program. Like other segments of German society, they had inevitably been exposed to political indoctrination and endless waves of anti-Semitic or racist slogans and propaganda. A large question mark hovers over the efficacy of this propaganda steamroller for the broad range of individuals who took part in the massacres. Most killers had not participated in the Nazi extermination apparatus during the years when it was operating at peak capacity. It is ultimately impossible to evaluate the impact of anti-Semitic propaganda on a group as diverse as those who were part of the camp evacuations and who became murderers during the war’s final weeks.

In one way or another, however, each of these individuals was shaped by their individual passage through social, public, or other systems whose operating culture provided space for this ideology: They were products of a society that had fostered and exposed them to a certain ethos for twelve years, transforming many of them into Nazis even if they did not define themselves as such. The nexus of their existence as individuals within a society that had adopted the Nazi ethos, and the conditions that prevailed during the final few months of the war, transformed many of them into killers who viewed prisoners as instrumental objects with whom they often related opportunistically. As long as the prisoners were being led in the direction of the destination camps, meeting their needs and serving as an insurance policy that kept them far from the front, they continued to lead them. The moment that the prisoners became a burden, as often happened, they did not hesitate to mercilessly slaughter them. An act ostensibly driven by fanatical ideological motives was thus often merely an expression of opportunistic calculation that weighed the prospects and hazards of evacuation, the fear of falling captive, and the wish to protect families from danger and violence. However, the murders could not have been perpetrated had the murderers not been closely associated with a social infrastructure that supported it and a system that had internalized a set of values that doomed the enemies of the nation to total eradication.

Conclusion

According to Wolfgang Sofsky, the internal history of the force and terror applied in the concentration camps should be conceived as having taken place within a closed, “thick” space (“dichte Beschreibung”). His description, rather than being grounded in facts, offers an interpretation of situations, processes, and structures. It is unsurprising, given his position, that Sofsky’s hugely important book about the concentration camps makes no reference whatsoever to the evacuations and the death marches. These events transpired within a different space and a different framework, involving new players in situations that had not existed or had not been operative during the
concentration camp years. Indeed, the death marches cannot be depicted in the same way as the situation inside the enclosed spaces of the camps. When Sofsky does allude to the death marches, he almost completely severs their connection with the historical context and invests them with meta-historical significance that can be explained only by resorting to psychopathological analysis. Sofsky construes the death marches as a phased collective torture whose continuation merely whetted the appetite of guards who derived increasingly intense pleasure from their unrestrained license to murder. The death marches offered a golden opportunity to enjoy violence, and they lasted long enough to enable the guards to quench their lust for torture. This also explains why they did not murder all of the prisoners at once 43.

The effort to interpret the intensity and senselessness of the violence inflicted on the prisoners based on chronology—several weeks before the surrender—has the potential of fueling this kind of argument. It is important to recall, however, that the months during which the death-marches took place were preceded by months, if not years, of violence and terror that had evolved inside the concentration-camp system, beginning on the day the system was established. The camps represented the outgrowth of a political instrument intended to help the Nazi regime stabilize itself and drive its opponents out of German society by confining them to a gigantic gulag of terror. Within this system, a vast range of options would be available for the ideological treatment of the problems that the regime sought to solve, including matters of “social hygiene,” providing cheap labor for essential production systems, removing and exterminating political and ideological enemies, providing resources for medical experiments, and murdering Jews and other ethnic outcasts. In this sense, the unfettered slaughter of prisoners during the death marches is a direct outgrowth of the internal development of this terror network. Despite the fact that the murders were perpetrated outside of the established territorial boundaries of the camp network, the objects of terror and violence remained identical to the earlier period.

In addition to constituting the concluding chapter of the history of the concentration camps, however, the death marches also represent the final chapter of the Nazi genocide. Nevertheless, the death-march chapter differs from its precursors. During the final months of the genocide, victims were no longer as clearly demarcated as they had been previously. Indeed, the victims during this final phase of the genocide were no longer exclusively Jews and, in many cases, they were no longer even primarily Jews. This explains why it is so difficult to position this period within the broader context of the Final Solution of the Jewish question. The argument that this period belongs within the framework that presided over the extermination of Jews muddles any effort to provide a historical explanation. More importantly, however, this position does not contribute to our understanding of the Jews’ position as a large and distinct population of victims at the close of the Nazi genocide because it obfuscates the expansion of the circle of victims to include a range of nationalities. Finally, this argument also hinders any effort to precisely examine the murderers’ motivations and identities, the practical and political circumstances under which the murders were perpetrated, and the social infrastructure that supported them. Attempting to explain the death-march phenomenon solely as another phase of the Final Solution necessarily imposes selectivity among the events examined, an operation that resembles shooting an arrow and then drawing the target afterwards. The extermination process became completely decentralized during the final months of the Nazi genocide. In a death march, the decision to pull the trigger was ultimately made by a murderer marching alongside a group of prisoners. He determined whether the timing and conditions for his act were propitious, and he determined the precise moment to perpetrate the fatal act. It was not a spontaneous or impulsive response, and it flowed from a sense of discretion as well as calculations regarding the utility, efficiency, time, and local conditions surrounding the act. It unquestionably did not represent a violent outburst on the part of an enflamed rabble who were driven by xenophobic hatred or radical anti-Semitism. Never in the years of the Nazi genocide, it seems, had such great power been placed in the hands of so many individuals, entitling them to use their sole discretion to decide whether to kill or not. The situation was significantly different from the bureaucratic control, management, and supervision of the act of murder, albeit often slack and erratic, that had presided over the genocide until the summer of 1944.

What began that summer as a process informed by economic considerations—a desire to preserve
the camp prisoner labor force at any cost—became a series of brutal evacuation marches in early 1945 in which guards indiscriminately slayed nearly anyone who delayed their frantic efforts to escape. As the war was winding down, uniformed killers were joined by others who were not in uniform, including civilians and members of quasi-military groups who, amid the prevailing law-and-order vacuum, felt authorized to do whatever they deemed necessary to guarantee the welfare of their families and communities. Although the killers came from units and entities with no previous operational relationships between them and from systems that had not coordinated their actions at the command or systems levels during previous phases of the genocide, they did not find it difficult to cooperate in committing murder. Random available forces thus combined ad hoc operations to carry out a task that was uniformly acknowledged as vital. Each human piece of this murderous jigsaw puzzle was responsible for only one step in the actions taken, from planning, forwarding instructions, escorting, guarding, supplying auxiliary support such as parts, fuel, and ammunition, the act of murder itself, and blurring the traces 44.

The victims’ ethnic or racial specificity became blurred, even as it identified them as the objects of an ideological system that shaped the perpetrators’ acts of lethal violence against them. The last phases of the Nazi genocide were different than earlier periods, and they cannot be explained according to the same parameters that had determined its contours during the peak years. Indeed, while the eliminationist ideological consensus continued to prevail, the image of the object of murder changed near the end. No longer was the enemy primarily considered to be Jewish or some other racial group such as a Gypsy or a Pole, defilers of the race, political opponents such as Soviet war prisoners, or the mentally retarded and those condemned by misfortune. It is consequently impossible to interpret the murder of concentration camp evacuees during the death marches simply as the closing chapter of the Final Solution of the Jewish Question. As a chapter of the Nazi genocide, this period nevertheless is associated with a specifically Jewish angle that needs to be integrated within a broader understanding of the totality of the underlying circumstances and factors. And indeed, the relative prominence of Jewish prisoners among camp inmates at the time of the evacuations must be seen as a central factor in any effort to explain the intensity of the slaughter that characterized these deadly final months. At the end, however, the Nazi genocide was guided by a different ideology of murder than the one that had been crafted earlier because it had developed into a set of nihilistic practices and beliefs that were devoid of over-arching principles. Although the killings were conducted within a known consensus, the uniqueness and the identity of the victims had become blurred, except for their all-encompassing and entirely imaginary image as a dangerous and inferior group that did not deserve to live.


9. Ibid, 335ff.

10. Ibid, 371.


23. Testimony of Ernst Kaltenbrunner, IMT, NO–2366.


35. Deposition of Anna Feda, January 28, 1946, TNA, FO 1020/2056.


37. Testimony of Yitzchak Grabowski, July 8, 1998, YVA, 03/7001.


