

## Lesson 5 The “Final Solution”

### STUDENT HANDOUT – Interview with Franz Stangl

Born in Austria in 1908, Franz Stangl joined the Austrian police in 1931 and became a criminal investigations officer in the political division. In 1940, Stangl joined the Euthanasia Program at its Hartheim castle institute – one of six centers where people with mental and physical disabilities and other “asocial” Germans were killed.

In March 1942, Stangl became commandant of the Sobibór extermination camp in Poland. Later that year he became commandant of Treblinka where he was responsible for the deaths of 870,000 Jews. After the prisoner revolt in Treblinka in September 1943, Stangl and his staff were transferred to Trieste, Italy to organize anti-partisan actions. He also spent time at the San Sabba concentration camp.

After the war Stangl returned to Austria, where he was arrested by the Americans for being an SS member (they did not know that he had participated in the extermination of Jews). However, Stangl was found out when the Americans began investigating the Euthanasia Program. About to be charged in May 1948, Stangl escaped to Rome, Syria, and eventually Brazil where he and his family lived under their own names until discovered in 1967. Stangl was tried in Germany and sentenced to life in prison, where he died in 1971.

While in prison Stangl was interviewed by Gitta Sereny, a British journalist. The interviews were published in a book entitled *Into That Darkness*. The following is an excerpt from one of their discussions in prison.

Q: Would it be true to say that you finally felt they weren't really human beings?

A: When I was on a trip once, years later in Brazil... my train stopped next to a slaughterhouse. The cattle in the pens, hearing the noise of the train, trotted up to the fence and stared at the train. They were very close to my window, one crowding the other, looking at me through the fence. I thought then, “look at this; this reminds me of Poland; that's just how the people looked, trustingly, just before they were put in tins.”

Q: You said “tins.” What do you mean?

A: ...I couldn't eat tinned meat after that. Those big eyes... which looked at me... not knowing that in no time at all they'd all be dead...

Q: So you didn't feel they were human beings?

A: Cargo. They were cargo.

Q: When do you think you began to think of them as cargo?

A: I think it started the day I first saw Totenlager [the sub-camp where the gas chambers stood] in Treblinka. I remember Wirth [first commander of the camp] standing there, next to the pits full of blue-black corpses. It had nothing to do with humanity; it couldn't have; it was a mass – a mass of rotting flesh. Wirth said, “What shall we do with this garbage?” I think unconsciously that started me thinking of them as cargo.

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Q: There were so many children, did they ever make you think of your children, of how you would feel in the position of those parents?

A: No... I can't say I ever thought that way... you see, I rarely saw them as individuals. It was always a huge mass. I sometimes stood on the wall and saw them in the tube [the passage leading to the gas chamber area]. But – how can I explain it – they were naked, packed together, running, being driven with whips like...

Q: Could you not have changed that?... In your position, could you not have stopped the nakedness, the whips, the horror of the cattle pens?

A: No, no, no. This was the system. Wirth had invented it. It worked. And because it worked, it was irreversible.

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#### Introduction

Although the Nazis came to power in 1933, it wasn't until the second half of 1941 that Nazi policy began to focus on the annihilation and murder of the Jewish people. This evolution in policy coincided with Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941. Historians note that on July 31, 1941, Hermann Goering, Hitler's second in command, sent an official order to Reinhard Heydrich, the head of the security branch of the SS, to authorize a "Final Solution of the Jewish Question." The exact meaning behind this order is still debated among many Holocaust scholars. Current research shows that mass systematic killing of Jewish men in the newly conquered territory of the Soviet Union began in June, and by August had spread to women and children as well. There is no surviving order by Hitler to expand the murder activities to encompass all Jews under Nazi control, but most scholars believe such an order was given in the autumn of 1941, or at the latest early in 1942. In the meantime, following the invasion of the Soviet Union, mass murder continued swiftly, and soon spread to Poland. By the end of 1941, many hundreds of thousands of Jews had been murdered.

#### Einsatzgruppen

The systematic murder of Jews began with the shootings in the occupied territories of the Soviet Union in June 1941. When "Operation Barbarossa" began, the Einsatzgruppen, special SS killing units, followed the German army, the Wehrmacht. Their job was to search for opponents of the Reich, including Communists and all Jews — and execute them. There were four units of Einsatzgruppen (A, B, C, and D) and the largest unit was composed of 1,000 men. These groups alone did not carry out the destruction of Soviet Jewry — wherever they went, ordinary German soldiers, German police units, and local collaborators helped get their murderous job done. By spring 1943, the Einsatzgruppen and their helpers had exterminated 1.25 million Jews and hundreds of thousands of others, including Soviet prisoners of war and Sinti-Roma.

The Einsatzgruppen killed their victims — men, women, and children — by gathering them along the edges of ravines, mines, ditches, or pits dug specifically for this purpose. First, they would force Jews to hand over their possessions and remove their clothing. Then they would shoot them and throw the bodies into ditches that often had been dug beforehand by Jews themselves.

The commanders completed daily reports of their murderous activities, which are still accessible today. The evidence of the murderous actions is also found in photos taken by the soldiers and personal diaries and letters sent back home to Germany, telling close family of their daily routine.

Among the bloodiest massacres was that which occurred at Babi Yar, just outside of Kiev, Ukraine in late September 1941. There, close to 34,000 Jewish men, women, and children were forcibly taken to the Jewish cemetery and ordered to remove their valuables and clothing before being killed. One by one, the young and old, grandparents and infants, were shot in the back of the head, as they lay on top of one another in a mass grave.

After the war, leaders of the Einsatzgruppen were tried at Nuremberg. Of twenty-four defendants, fourteen were sentenced to death. Only four were actually executed; the rest had their sentences reduced. Although there were subsequent trials of men who had been involved in the shooting of Jews, most of those who took part in the murder were never punished.

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#### Euthanasia and the Extermination Camps

The mobile killing squads proved to be problematic. They required large numbers of executioners, the men suffered from psychological repercussions, and it was difficult to conceal the killing from the surrounding populace. A new method was therefore devised, aimed at solving a number of difficulties for the perpetrators. First, instead of the killer coming to the victims, the victims would now be brought to killing centers. The new system of murder by gassing, moreover, served to reduce the direct contact between the killers and their victims, making the murderers’ task easier.

Experience with these methods had been gained in the so-called Euthanasia Program. In Germany, since 1939, the mass killing of Germans considered a burden to the race — those with mental or physical disabilities, and others who suffered from a range of diseases thought to be hereditary — had been conducted. The killing installations that had been set up in Germany utilized gas, among other methods, and in light of their experience, the staff of these institutions were transferred to the east in order to set up and run extermination camps.

A new phase in the reign of terror was reached when the “Final Solution” was formulated, and extermination camps were constructed with the express purpose of killing Jews. Unlike other enemies of the Third Reich, all Jews in Nazi-occupied territory were destined for extermination. In the words of Elie Wiesel, himself a former camp inmate, “While not all victims were Jews, all Jews were victims.”

Six camps were considered to be extermination camps. From all over Europe, Jews were deported, most commonly like animals in cattle trains, to be slaughtered en masse at these sites. All of these camps — Chelmno, Belzec, Sobibór, Treblinka, Auschwitz-Birkenau, and Majdanek — were in occupied Poland. All the camps were built close to railway junctions, so that they would be easily accessible by train. For the most part, the Nazis tried to hide their activities from the local population.

With the exception of Auschwitz and Majdanek, which were also concentration camps (places of detention and labor), the camps had only one purpose: the Jews brought to the camps were to be killed. Jews would arrive at the camp, usually after having spent several days in transit without food or water. Within a few hours after reaching the camp, they would all be dead.

In Auschwitz-Birkenau, some transports would go through a selection in which some people were selected for work while the rest were sent directly to the gas chambers. The entire procedure was planned for the greatest possible efficiency. In order to prevent panic, which could impede the killing, the victims were deceived into believing that they were going to have showers. Their personal possessions were taken from them, they undressed, and their hair was shorn; both the hair and personal possessions were used by the authorities. The killing by gas limited contact between perpetrator and victim. Contrary to the shootings, gassing became like an “assembly-line” procedure.

There are few survivors of the four sites that were exclusively extermination camps, since most of the people who reached them were sent immediately to the gas chambers. In these camps, very few prisoners’ lives were spared in order to work in the crematoria and in other camp functions. More prisoners survived Majdanek and Auschwitz since, as slave laborers, they were not killed immediately. Some prisoners survived gruesome Nazi medical experiments. Those who did survive the extermination camps tell of the unimaginable horrors they experienced there every day.

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#### The Perpetrators

Hundreds of thousands of people were involved, either directly or indirectly, in implementing the "Final Solution." The core organizers and planners of the annihilation of European Jewry came from the ranks of the Nazi Party and the SS, who in general fervently believed in Nazi ideology; the spearhead of the murders was the SS, among whom were commanders of killing units and Nazi camps. Yet it is important to emphasize that the SS members were not the only ones who were actively involved in carrying out the "Final Solution." Soldiers from the Wehrmacht (the German regular army) and the German police forces took part in these activities. Moreover, officials from the civil apparatus that the Germans maintained in the occupied lands participated in implementing the "Final Solution."

For a wide range of reasons, people from the nations that fell under Nazi domination or were allied with the Nazis took part in the "Final Solution," either directly or indirectly. Some were motivated by their acceptance of Nazi ideology; others were of German extraction and willingly took up the offer by the Nazi authorities to become their partners; others collaborated with the Nazis in the hope that it would further their own national political agenda; others joined the Nazis in order to ameliorate their own or their family's suffering under the brutal occupation; and still others joined the Nazis in order to escape almost certain death as prisoners of war on the Eastern Front. Regardless of how the door to collaboration swung open, many non-Germans became full and frequently enthusiastic participants in the mass systematic murder of European Jews.

