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The Nazi death camp at Auschwitz was liberated 60 years ago this month, but the world still struggles to understand the minds of those who committed the atrocities there. LAURENCE REES, writer and producer of a major BBC TV series marking the event, has interviewed war criminals from German, Russian and Japanese camps and he explains why many of the former Nazi soldiers he met had a different mentality from the others. On page 20, DANIEL SNOWMAN considers whether a place of such horror as Auschwitz has a valid role as a heritage attraction

The camp gates
Auschwitz promise
freedom through work
(Arbeit Macht Frei)



AUSCHWITZ

WHAT SORT of man was capable of creating the site of the largest recorded mass murder in history, where acts of atrocity were everyday occurrences? Perhaps someone like Amon Göth, commandant of Plaszow labour camp in Poland (memorably portrayed by Ralph Fiennes in the film *Schindler's List*), an irrational, sadistic monster utterly different from the people you encounter in everyday life.

But if you imagined such a person was commandant of Auschwitz, then you're wrong. According to his interrogator at the Nuremberg war trials, Whitney Harris, Rudolf Höss appeared "normal", "like a grocery clerk". Prisoners who came across him at Auschwitz confirmed this view, adding that Höss always appeared calm and collected. There is no record of him ever personally hitting – let alone killing – anyone at the camp.

Höss lived with his wife and children in a house just yards from the crematorium in Auschwitz main camp, where some of the earliest killing experiments were conducted using the poisonous

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insecticide Zyklon B. During his working day Höss presided over the murder of more than a million people, but at home he lived the life of a solid middle-class German father and husband. It is this apparent normality that makes Höss a more terrifying figure than an unhinged brute like Göth, and compels us to try – in so far as it is possible – to understand him and the circumstances that made his murderous career possible.

Like most ardent Nazis, Höss's character and beliefs had been shaped by his reaction to the previous 30 years of German history. Born in Baden-Baden, in the Black Forest, to Catholic parents in 1900, Höss was affected in his early years by a series of important influences: an overbearing father; his service in the First World War where he was the

youngest NCO in the German Army; his sense of betrayal at the subsequent loss of the war; his service in the paramilitary Freikorps in the early 1920s in an attempt to counter the perceived Communist threat on the boundaries of Germany, and involvement in violent right-wing politics that led to a two year imprisonment.

Many other Nazis were moulded in the same way, not least Adolf Hitler. Son of a domineering father, nursing his violent hatred of those he felt had lost Germany the war in which he had just fought (and during which, like Höss, he had been awarded an Iron Cross) Hitler tried to seize power in a violent putsch in the same year as Höss was involved in a politically inspired murder.

For Hitler, Höss and others on the Nationalist Right, the most urgent need was to understand why Germany had lost the First World War and made what they felt was such a humiliating peace: and in the post-war years they believed they had found the answer. Was it not obvious, they felt, that the Jews had been responsible? Had not somehow the Jews, with their alleged Communist sympathies, stabbed Germany in the back? It didn't matter that large numbers of loyal German Jews had fought with bravery (and many died) during the war. Nor that thousands of German Jews were neither left wing nor Communist. It was easier for Höss, Hitler and the other Nazis to find a scapegoat, for Germany's predicament, in the German Jews.

International conspiracy

Höss claimed to have little quarrel with individuals – the problem for him was the "International World Jewish conspiracy" by which he fantasised that Jews secretly held the levers of power and sought to help each other across national boundaries. This was what he believed >

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▲ Himmler, left, recruited Höss into the SS



▲ Rudolf Höss at the Nuremberg trials, April 1946

Rudolf Höss was Auschwitz Commandant 1940–43. He joined the army in 1917 and in 1924 spent two years in prison, indicted with Martin Bormann, who later played a leading role in the Nazi party, for murdering a man they claimed to be a traitor. He joined the Nazi party in 1922 and became a full-time SS member in 1934. He

worked in Dachau and Sachsenhausen before taking control of Auschwitz where he pioneered the use of Zyklon B for extermination. His efficiency led to a posting at the SS HQ in charge of concentration camps. In 1945 he avoided arrest by the Allies and in 1946 was caught working on a farm. He gave evidence at the Nuremberg trials and was handed over to the Poles by the War Crimes Commission. He was executed at Auschwitz in 1947. In prison, he wrote his biography – the royalties are given to a fund for Auschwitz survivors

▶ Höss after his arrest in North Germany, March 1946



▼ Höss at Nuremberg airport just before being extradited to Poland, June 1946



The camp system

As soon as the National Socialists took power in 1933 they began to round up their enemies and place them into camps. The early camps run by the SA (Sturmabteilung, or Brownshirts) soon gave way to concentration camps (named after British camps in the Boer War). The first of these was Dachau near Munich and the early prisoners were largely political opponents of the regime. As the camp network grew the scope for inhabitants was widened to include criminals, homosexuals, trade unionists, Gypsies and Jews.

The camps were administered by the Inspectorate of Concentration Camps which was directly under the SS leader



new form of camp was established, the death camp. The first was created in Belzec in March and there were six in total, all located in modern day Poland (see map, left). The aim of the death camps was the systematic extermination of Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals and others considered undesirable.

Gas chambers were the preferred method of execution and the bodies were then burned in enormous crematoria. It

Heinrich Himmler. Conditions inside were brutal but although approximately one million people died in these camps, the ultimate aim was not to murder inmates. They were penal institutions and many had an economic function, particularly during the war.

Prisoners provided cheap labour and were used in many branches of industry. At its peak in 1944 the concentration camp network comprised over 500 camps.

Following the Wannsee Conference in January 1942 that formalised the "Final Solution", a

is impossible to be sure of the numbers who perished in these camps but it certainly runs into several millions. At Auschwitz alone it is estimated that 1-1.5 million were killed and even in the smaller camps such as Sobibor close to 250,000 died.

had led to Germany's defeat in the First World War and what he felt had to be destroyed. He later wrote: "As a fanatical National Socialist I was firmly convinced that our ideals would gradually be accepted and would prevail throughout the world ... Jewish supremacy would thus be abolished".

Höss was almost one of the founding members of the Nazi party, joining up in November 1922. Heinrich Himmler, the Third Reich's leader of the SS from 1929, an ardent Nazi talent spotter, knew Höss from the early days. He invited Höss to become a full-time member of the SS and in November 1934 Höss arrived at Dachau in Bavaria to start his service as a concentration camp guard.

Today, certainly in Britain and America, there exists confusion about the function of a place like Dachau. Concentration camps like Dachau (established on 22 March 1933, less than two months after Adolf Hitler became German Chancellor) were different from death camps like Treblinka which were not in existence until the middle of the war. Adding further to the confusion is the complex history of Auschwitz, the most infamous camp of all, which was to evolve into both a concentration and a death camp. Unlike these later camps, Dachau in the 1930s was not a place of mass

murder – the majority sent there were released after a year to 18 months. Whilst Dachau was always a place where intense mental and physical suffering were inflicted on the prisoners – and in the course of its existence many inmates did die – it was easy for Höss to

'I need only hard, totally committed SS men. There is no place amongst us for soft people'

rationalise what happened there. He felt it important to forcibly "re-educate" the internal opponents of the Third Reich.

Höss's three and a half years at Dachau were to play a defining role in shaping his mentality. Above all else, Höss learnt the essential philosophy of the SS while in Dachau. Theodor Eicke, the first commandant (who in 1934 rose to be the Reich's inspector of concentration camps), had preached one doctrine from the first – hardness: "Anyone who shows even the slightest vestige of sympathy towards them [prisoners] must immediately vanish from our ranks. I need

only hard, totally committed SS men. There is no place amongst us for soft people".

Höss was a model member of the SS and in April 1936 he was made Rapportführer, chief assistant to the commander of the camp. In September 1936 he was promoted to lieutenant and in 1938 transferred to Sachsenhausen concentration camp where he remained until his elevation to commandant of the new concentration camp at Auschwitz.

This then was the man who arrived at Auschwitz in May 1940, with six years' service behind him as a concentration camp guard. He felt ready to take on his biggest challenge: creating a new concentration camp from a few vermin-infested barracks. He knew what was expected of him and his experience at Dachau and Sachsenhausen offered a blueprint for him to follow. But his superiors had other plans, and over the next months and years the camp Höss built at Auschwitz was to develop along a very different path indeed.

Höss oversaw the transformation of Auschwitz, during the first year or so of the camp's existence. Originally a poorly resourced but brutal concentration camp for Poles, it expanded with the need to provide slave labour to build a giant synthetic oil and rubber factory at nearby Monowitz. It changed again with the arrival of Soviet prisoners of war in July 1941

TIMELINE: AUSCHWITZ AND THE 'FINAL SOLUTION'

1933	May 1940	14 June 1940	22 June 1941
Dachau the first Nazi concentration camp is established near Munich	Rudolf Höss arrives in the Polish town of Oswiecim to create a new concentration camp on the site of a deserted Polish Army barracks	The first Polish political prisoners arrive at Auschwitz. The regime is brutal. More than half of the first 20,000 Poles who are sent to Auschwitz are dead within 18 months	Germany invades the Soviet Union. Naz killing squads, the Einsatzgruppen, open in Russia, inciting pogroms murdering Jews in the service of the party or the state

CAMP GUARDS FORCED TO FACE UP TO THEIR CRIMES

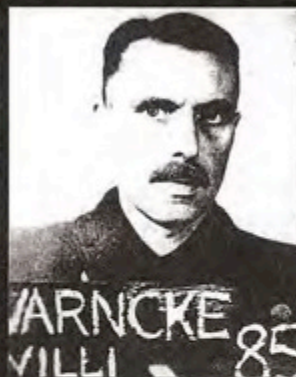
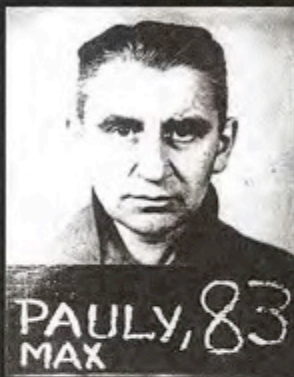
It was to murder these Soviet prisoners (considered sub-human by committed Nazis), as well as to kill those thought unfit to work, that Zyklon B was first used at Auschwitz. Höss's deputy, Fritzsche, first thought of using the poisonous crystals, and Höss records that he personally attended the first gassing he could: "Protected by a gas mask, I watched the killing myself. In the crowded cells death came instantaneously the moment the Zyklon B was thrown in. A short, almost smothered cry and it was all over". Whilst the evidence is that death could be far from instantaneous, it was certainly the case that for the Nazis at Auschwitz the use of Zyklon B alleviated the process of murder. Höss wrote that he was relieved that this new method of killing had been found as he would be spared a "bloodbath".

At the new camp being built at Birkenau two miles away from Auschwitz main camp, Höss oversaw the conversion of two cottages into gas chambers and the completion, in 1943, of a total of four crematoria with gas chambers attached. These would contribute to the destruction of one million, one hundred thousand people at Auschwitz. One million of them were Jews, who began to be sent to the camp in large numbers in the spring of 1942 as part of the Nazis' "Final Solution".

Innovation and efficiency

Crucial to understanding how it was possible for Höss to carry on, calmly and faithfully, organising the killing, is the knowledge that he was never faced with one sudden command to commit mass murder. His long career in concentration camps prepared him step by step for the moment when the gassings began at Auschwitz. Indeed, he saw his subordinate's innovation of the use of Zyklon B as a killing device as an "improvement" – a method of murder that carried with it less potential to cause psychological damage to his men than killing by firing squad.

Höss was no mere robot, blindly following orders, but an innovator in the way he organized the killing. On occasion he felt able to question, even criticise his boss, Heinrich Himmler. In March 1941, for example, Höss objected to the expansion of Auschwitz – citing practical difficulties – and frankly told Himmler so. Strange as it may seem, the Nazi leadership allowed functionaries lower down to use their initiative and voice their views. Höss knew he never needed to fear terrible retribution if he questioned



Portraits of prison guards from the Nazi camps, arrested at the end of the war

Former guards display canisters of Zyklon B poison gas at Auschwitz after the camp's liberation by Soviet troops in January 1945



▲ Camp guards beat a Jewish prisoner at Poniatowa labour camp in Poland



▲ April 1945: a Russian survivor at Buchenwald camp, liberated by the US Army, identifies a former guard who brutally beat prisoners



◀ Heinrich Himmler, Reich leader of the SS, with staff at Stutthof camp in Poland, the first concentration camp built outside Germany

July 1941

Sick/disabled inmates at Auschwitz are selected for gassing. As part of the **adult euthanasia scheme** they are sent to Germany and gassed with bottled carbon monoxide.

August 14, 1941

Himmler visits the HQ of Einsatzgruppe B in Minsk and learns that shooting women and children is causing some of his troops **psychological damage**.

Autumn 1941

The first Auschwitz **gassing takes place, using Zyklon B**, a powerful insecticide, to kill Soviet POWs.

October 1941

Plans for the new camp at Birkenau are altered to **exclude living space**. 10,000 Soviet POWs arrive to build the extension. Less than 1,000 are alive the following spring.

NASTY, BRUTISH AND SHORT THE REALITY OF CAMP LIFE



Hungarian Jews arrive at Auschwitz-Birkenau, June 1944. Höss later admitted that the camp lost count of the number of people murdered there



▲ Boys at Auschwitz wearing the striped uniform of the camp, c 1940



Women prisoners at Auschwitz after being declared "fit for work" – the registration process included shaving, delousing and disinfecting



▲ Envelope, [complete with Hitler stamps and the camp correspondence rules] that held a letter sent by inmate Josef Wantula at Auschwitz



Prisoners on their way through Auschwitz-Birkenau to Crematoria V and VI – the "unfit for work" were sent immediately to their deaths

▼ An elderly Jewish man selected for death at Auschwitz-Birkenau



an order. He had joined the SS because he believed wholeheartedly in the overall Nazi vision, and he felt free to criticise the details of its implementation. He was that most powerful of subordinates, someone who was doing his job not because he was told to, but because he believed that what he was doing was right.

Höss was behaving in a similar manner to many of the former Nazis I have met who, unlike him, survived to be re-integrated back into German post-war society. And there is something about the mentality of the Nazis that seems at odds with the perpetrators who flourished in other totalitarian regimes. That was certainly the conclusion I reached not just on completing the current television series on Auschwitz, but also after finishing three separate other projects on the Second World War: first the book and television series *Nazis: A Warning from History*, then *War of the Century*, an examination of the war between Stalin and Hitler, and finally *Horror in the East* an attempt to understand the Japanese psyche during the 1930s and the Second World War. One unplanned consequence is that it has meant that I have met perpetrators from all three of the major totalitarian powers – Germany, Japan and the Soviet Union. Having done so I can confirm that the Nazi war criminals I met were different.

In the Soviet Union the climate of fear under Stalin was pervasive in a way it never was in Germany under Hitler until the last days of the war. The description one former Soviet Air Force officer gave me of open meetings in the 1930s when anyone could be denounced as an "enemy of the people" still haunts me. No one was safe from the knock on the door at midnight. No matter how well you tried to conform, no matter how many slogans you spouted, such was Stalin's malevolence that nothing you did or said or thought could save you if the spotlight picked you out.

Voting for Hitler

But in Nazi Germany, unless you were a member of a specific risk group – like the Jews, the Communists, the Gypsies, homosexuals, the "work-shy" (a euphemism for prostitutes and criminals), and indeed anyone who opposed the regime – you could live comparatively free from fear. Despite recent academic work that emphasises how the Gestapo relied upon denunciations from members of the public to do its work, the central truth still holds that the majority of the German population – almost certainly

October 1941

The first **German Jews** are deported to Eastern Europe. Late in 1941 Belzec, a small experimental gas camp, is built as a place to kill "unproductive" Jews

January 1942

Chełmno, a base for "gas vans" (in which 50-70 people were killed at a time), begins **murdering selected Jews** from the Lodz ghetto

20 January 1942

Senior Nazis meet at the Wannsee conference to co-ordinate the "**Final Solution of the Jewish Question**" and to agree a definition of "Jew"

Spring, 1942

The first **large-scale gassing of Jews** in Auschwitz-Birkenau takes place in gas chambers in converted cottages. Eventually four chambers are established



Prostheses of victims of the gas chambers of Auschwitz-Birkenau, c 1945

right up until the moment Germany started to lose the war – felt so personally secure and happy that they would have voted to keep Hitler in power if there had been free and fair elections. In contrast, in the Soviet Union not even Stalin's most loyal colleagues felt they could sleep securely.

The consequence of this for those who perpetrated crimes at Stalin's behest was that the suffering they inflicted was so arbitrary

With the Nazi regime long defeated, they are not sorry for what they did – indeed they almost appear proud

that they often didn't know the reasons for it. The former Soviet secret policeman I met who undressed Kalmyks up and put them on trains to exile in Siberia in the winter, still didn't have a clear idea about what was behind the policy even today (during the Second World War Stalin, suspicious of the loyalty of the Kalmyks, a ethnic group, deported the whole nation – over half died during the journey and exile). The policeman had one stock response when asked why he'd taken part – ironically it's the one most commonly ascribed to Nazis in popular myth – he said he'd been "acting under orders". He'd committed a crime because he was told to, and knew that if he didn't then he'd be shot, and he trusted that his bosses knew what they were doing. Which meant, of course, that when

Stalin died and Communism fell he was free to move on and leave the past behind. It also shows up Stalin as a cruel, bullying dictator, who has many parallels in history, not least in our own time.

Then there were the Japanese war criminals I encountered who committed some of the most appalling atrocities in modern history. In China, during Japan's occupation in the Second Sino-Japanese War 1931–45, Japanese soldiers split open pregnant women and bayoneted the foetuses; they used local farmers for target practice; they tortured thousands of innocent people in ways that rival the Gestapo at their worst, and they were pursuing medical experiments long before Dr Mengele. They'd grown up in an intensely militaristic society; had been subjected to military training of the most brutal sort; had been told since they were children to worship their Emperor (who was also their commander in chief) and lived in a culture that historically elevated the all too human desire to conform into a semi-religion.

All this was summed up by one veteran who told me that when he'd been asked to take part in the gang rape of a Chinese woman, he saw it less as a sexual act and more as a sign of final acceptance by the group, many of whom had previously bullied him mercilessly. Like the Soviet secret policemen I met, these Japanese veterans attempted to justify their actions

almost exclusively with reference to an external source – the regime itself.

Something different appears in the minds of many Nazi war criminals and is encapsulated not just by the character and career of Rudolf Höss but by the interviews we have conducted with members of Nazi killing squads who shot Jews in the Soviet Union. Petras Zelionka, for example, murdered Jews in Lithuania: "You just pressed the trigger and shot," he says, "that was it – it was not a big ceremony. Some did it because of their indignation... the Jews are very selfish". Even today, with the Nazi regime long defeated, they are not sorry for what they did – indeed they almost appear proud of their actions. The easy course would be to hide behind the "acting under orders" or "I was brainwashed by propaganda" excuses, but such is the strength of their own internal conviction that they don't. It's a loathsome, despicable position – but nonetheless an intriguing one. And the contemporary evidence shows that it is not unique.

Willing participants

At Auschwitz, for example, there is not one case in the records of an SS man being prosecuted for refusing to take part in the killings, whilst there is plenty of material showing that the real discipline problem in the camp – from the point of view of the SS leadership – was theft. There were even suspicions that Höss himself was personally benefiting from the murders. The SS at the camp thus appear to have agreed with the Nazi leadership that it was right to kill the Jews, but disagreed with Himmler's policy of not letting them individually profit from the crime. And the penalties for an SS man caught stealing could be draconian – almost certainly worse than for simply refusing to take an active part in the killing.

The history of men like Rudolf Höss and many of his SS colleagues is therefore not one of mindless automatons simply responding to the commands of their masters. It is at once more complex and more troubling. For it reveals that one of the worst crimes in the history of the world was committed – to a large part – not by those touched with obvious lunacy like Amon Göth, but by human beings who calmly and coldly thought through their actions, and then made possible the murder of millions. That knowledge alone makes this a history that should be studied now and in the future – a warning for us and for those who will come after. **U**

March 1944

Hitler orders the deportation of Hungary. If Eichmann begins mass deportations

May to early July 1944

The most frenzied period of killing in the history of Auschwitz. More than 300,000 Hungarian Jews are murdered in a ten week period

2 August 1944

The gypsy camp at Auschwitz is liquidated. At Auschwitz more than 20,000 gypsies are killed altogether

27 January 1945

The Red Army liberates Auschwitz but 60,000 prisoners had been force-marched west (the Death March) to be sent to other camps

