



The Holocaust Educational Trust

Auschwitz A-level Extension Tasks

Introduction

The following activity is intended for use with students aged 16 and over, and assumes the form of a source-work exercise. Students should read through the excerpts of expert interviews and respond to the questions with extended essay-style answers. Whilst referring directly to the relevant historian(s) in their response, students should also be encouraged to utilize all resources available to them via the WW2history.com website.

LAURENCE REES: Auschwitz, of course, has a very particular place in all this, because it is almost the bridge between these concentration camps in the Thirties and the death camps, because it merges aspects of both, doesn't it?

CHRISTOPHER BROWNING: Well, it's a hybrid in the sense that it is a concentration camp which becomes a huge labour camp and also becomes a death camp. So all three main functions of the camp system are combined in one. It starts out as a concentration camp for Polish political prisoners. When Himmler makes his deals for the German industrialists to come and build factories there it becomes a huge labour camp. Birkenau initially is built for a hundred thousand Soviet prisoners of war who are to be slave labour, but they never show-up - a small number are sent but they die almost immediately. So it's available to bring in Jews and then in three stages they turn it into a death camp. Initially we know that in September there were a couple of tests with the Zyklon B, and that the crematorium in the whole camp, the main camp - Auschwitz - then is used periodically to kill prisoners weeded out of the local labour camps in Silesia that are sent there, because they've been worked to the point that they're not productive any more. Some are shot, some are gassed, and all that happens in the Fall of 1941. In the spring of 1942 they move things to Birkenau where two peasant huts are sealed up, bunkers one and two, and March - particularly for the big deportations from Silesia in May - is the beginning of the first mass killings.

The Slovakian Jews start coming in a little earlier, and then of course in the summer you have a second bunker on line and the Dutch, French and Belgian Jews begin to arrive. And then Himmler comes that summer and witnesses some of this and gives the approval to take the design of the gas chamber that had been designed back in October of 1941 for the old camp, which in the blueprints has been moved to Birkenau in February of 1942, for four other gas chambers. And they come on line in the spring of 1943. And Auschwitz then becomes the key place for where Jews from the other parts of Europe are sent. Some are still sent to Treblinka and Sobibor, but almost all the transports of Western, Southern and Central Europe go to Auschwitz.

DAVID CESARANI: And then they discover the gas chambers are too small. The rail tracks won't bear the weight of all the trucks. Auschwitz is completely unprepared because there isn't a budget for genocide in the running costs of Auschwitz. So you convert peasant bunkers and they're too small and there's nowhere to dispose of the bodies. I think this bizarre, macabre, darkly comical series of episodes illustrates the gap between decisions that are being made, conceptual leaps being taken, and their concretisation.

MARY FULBROOK: I think that there are certain key moments when decisions are taken. If you look at the late '41, early '42 period those key moments taking place at that point when they're trying to put things into effect. So on the one hand I would sort of say there were distinct different moments of debate, for example, if you look at the Auschwitz area, the SS work process, you see the first major selections in Eastern Upper Silesia in May 1942 and then again in August 1942 where there's still a bit of a debate about whether they are more useful for our work effort or whether we should gas them straightaway because they're Jewish vermin and so on. So there's still that kind of debate going on.

On the other hand, if you look at the truly fascinating report on drains and drainage and the sewage system for Auschwitz in September 1942 you get Bracht, who's the Gauleiter of the area saying I am aware of the Fuehrer Befehl [order]. He uses the word Befehl, so he has the sense that there has been a Befehl at some time for the special treatment of the Jews.

TASK: To what extent was Auschwitz a microcosm of the Holocaust?

DAVID CESARANI: Now, I don't think that the end stage of the genocide against the Jews really tells us anything about the origins of genocide. It tells us something about how you can carry it out in the same way that the genocide in Rwanda tells us that if you give a hundred thousand people machetes and tell each one to kill six people of another group they can probably manage it in a relatively short time. So what? It doesn't explain the origins, it doesn't explain the dynamics that lead up to genocide, and I think we are stuck with Auschwitz as the source of all of the lessons and I think that we're stuck with the wrong end of the process. What fascinates me is how the Nazis come to power with a racist, anti-Semitic, crude and

vulgar ideology. How desperate can a society be that it elects thugs, criminals, boors, horrible men and women?

TASK: Is Cesarani correct that “we are stuck with Auschwitz as the source of all of the lessons and I think that we’re stuck with the wrong end of the process”? Why has Auschwitz become the icon of the Holocaust?