
THE DEATH MARCHES

THE FINAL PHASE OF NAZI GENOCIDE

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Introduction

In January 1945, Nazi records showed that there were some 714,000 prisoners in the concentration camp network. It may quite safely be assumed that the actual number was much higher because even those who were responsible for and operated *l'univers concentrationnaire* (as David Rousset, a survivor of the Nazi camps, denoted it in his books by that name) were unable to gauge its vast dimensions with absolute accuracy. This figure does not take into account the unknown number of prisoners who were incarcerated in other sections of the Nazi oppression machine: forced laborers in private concerns, prisoners of war (POWs), and inmates of camps that were not part of the concentration camp system. The inhabitants of this world were dispersed in hundreds of camps, large and small, over the length and breadth of the disintegrating Nazi empire, from the Rhine in the west to the shores of the Vistula in the east, from the Baltic shore in the north to the Danube in the south. The inmates of the concentration camp world constituted a unique microcosm of the victims of Nazi terror. They included all the nationalities in Europe and some peoples who had strayed there from countries that were not even under Nazi control or that were fighting Germany. Among them were Uzbeks, Armenians, Georgians, Ukrainians, Russians, Poles, Lithuanians, and Letts. There were Serbs, Albanians, Greeks, Rumanians, Italians, and nationals of France, Spain, Belgium, Holland, and Norway, as well as Americans, Britons, Turks, and Arabs. There were Germans, Austrians, and Gypsies, and at that time there were also very many Jews. The camp population included Christians and Muslims, homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, men and women, the old and the young, and even children. Each and every

one of them had been persecuted and imprisoned on racial, political, religious, or social grounds. Four months later, when the clamor of war in Europe had died down and the Third Reich had departed from the stage of history, at least 250,000 of these prisoners were no longer among the living: many others did not survive for long after the liberation because of their desperate physical condition. This was a ghastly coup de grâce even by the criteria of Nazi genocide activities: more than 35 percent of the camp prisoners perished in Nazism's last murderous eruption during the death marches.

In the extensive literature on Nazi genocide, this last chapter of the Holocaust has been overlooked. The facts are known today only along general lines. In the past few decades, with the expansion of commemorative projects and the establishment of memorial centers in the Nazi concentration camp sites in Poland, Germany, and Austria, a number of studies have been devoted to the last journeys of prisoners from specific camps. Collections of testimonies, documents, maps, and photographs have appeared, and booklets, albums, and books have been published. These publications document and describe what happened along the routes of suffering and death. On the initiative of administrators of memorial sites and survivors of the death marches in the region, or local inhabitants who witnessed the horrors, monuments were erected after the war at sites where mass graves were uncovered. Today teachers, students, and visitors can follow the death march routes and learn what happened along them. But the explanation for this historical phenomenon—how hundreds of thousands of prisoners were force-marched for months at a time through the length and breadth of the collapsing Third Reich and how they were gradually liquidated, whether before departure, during the march, or after arriving at their destinations—has remained vague and incomplete, and is sometimes marred by apologetic and disturbing explanations.

By the time the war entered its last months, Nazi genocide activities were already an open and well-known fact. However, the press of the free world and the Hebrew-language press in Palestine published few references to the final stage, which began in summer–fall 1944 and lasted until Germany's capitulation in May 1945. In the last months of the war the British press paid scant attention to the concentration camps in general and to the evacuation and murder of prisoners in particular. If the evacuation of prisoners from camps in the East was reported, it was almost always in reference to Allied POWs, whose fate evoked much greater interest than did that of the concentration camp prisoners.¹

The U.S. press also failed to cover the evacuations and the liquidation of prisoners along the retreat routes. In January 1945 it published only a handful of reports on the liberation of Auschwitz and made no mention whatso-

ever of the evacuation of inmates. It was only in April 1945, particularly after U.S. forces reached the camps and discovered the atrocities that had been perpetrated there, that more items began to appear on happenings in the camps before their liberation. The photographs of piles of bullet-torn, charred, and twisted corpses, and of the walking skeletons who had somehow survived, appeared in the U.S. press and reached the general public.² However, this information did not necessarily generate new insight into the period of the death marches, and the term “death march” itself did not appear in the newspapers. The horrors uncovered, sometimes depicted by liberated prisoners, contributed more to Western public opinion’s understanding of the character and countenance of Nazism than to its recognition of the scope of the genocide perpetrated by the Nazis in the last few months of the war.

The few reports in the Western press seem to have reflected the impressions gained by Allied Army and intelligence bodies. The intelligence bodies collected information on what had occurred along the retreat routes from Poland westward. A considerable amount of data relating to the evacuation of Allied POWs from camps in the East in the face of the Soviet advance was dispatched to London and Washington in January–February 1945. The joint British-U.S. headquarters devoted a number of discussions to the possibility of achieving some kind of agreement with the Germans that would avert the evacuation of the POW camps and leave the prisoners in place until the Soviet Red Army arrived. However, according to most evaluations, there was no real chance of such an agreement because the Germans never made concessions to the Allies without demanding significant compensation. This was particularly true where POWs were involved, since they served as a protective cover against aerial bombings of evacuation convoys.³ The Allied military leaders were also concerned about the plight of millions of German civilians, who were abandoning their homes, fleeing for their lives, and roaming the highways for fear of the Red Army. The Allied military commands, and especially the Americans, were perturbed by this problem because they estimated that they would be forced to tackle it in the near future, after Germany’s surrender. But of the fate of hundreds of thousands of prisoners trudging along the roads and being murdered at the roadside, not a word was written. Nor do we know of any serious discussions of this problem.⁴

The Hebrew-language press in pre-state Palestine devoted little space to this chapter. In February 1945 several newspapers, most prominently *Hatzofeh*, the organ of the National Religious Party, reported the Nazi decision to exterminate the last of the Jews remaining in Polish camps before retreating. These items were based on information received from Germany and on rumors and fears in the West, and they related mainly to Auschwitz and Stutthof. As a rule, the term “death march” was not used, even on the rare

occasions when the phenomenon itself was described. *Davar*, the daily of the Histadrut (General Federation of Labor), reported “death processions,” and *Haaretz*, in its November 1944 report on the murder of Jews from Budapest deported to the Austrian-Hungarian border area to build fortifications against the Russian advance, wrote that the prisoners had “wandered on foot.” Several weeks after the liberation of Auschwitz, *Haaretz* reported that camp inmates had been evacuated and transported by rail to Berlin before the Red Army arrived. In April 1945 several items were again devoted to German plans to liquidate the last of the Jews in the camps before the liberation. As is now well known, no such operative plan ever existed, although the mood in several camps was such that mass murder of prisoners was contemplated, and hence the wave of rumors arose. Concomitantly with these rumors, there were reports that concentration camp inmates had been stranded on trains and liberated by the Allied forces.⁵

Here we see one possible explanation of the circumstances that obscured the fact that the death march period was a unique chapter in the annals of Nazi genocide. The few reports in the Hebrew press in 1945 portrayed the death marches and the liberation of the camps as the last stage in the “Final Solution” of the Jewish question. Predictably, these fragmentary reports of killings or rumors of plans to liquidate camp inmates in the last few months of the war were associated directly with the previous flow of information about the extermination of millions of Jews in death camps and murder sites. No particular note was taken of the fact that, toward the end of the war, because of unique constraints and developments, the camp prisoners were a heterogeneous and complex group of victims, and the Jews were only one component of this group, albeit a large one. Even some years after the war, this fact was not given sufficient consideration and did not become the starting point for study of the period of the death marches.

Moreover, at the Nuremberg trials, references to the concluding months of the war and the evacuation of the camps did not promote understanding of the period of the death marches and the nature of the killings perpetrated at the time. As we now know, for a number of reasons the trial did not focus directly on the Nazi Final Solution or on the unparalleled nature and characteristics of Nazi genocide. If these issues were discussed, they were considered, as a rule, in the context of crimes against humanity, which lay at the core of the legal discourse at Nuremberg, and then only when the defendants were interrogated about persecution in Germany or the question of anti-Semitism.⁶ The subject of the concentration camp evacuations was raised mainly during the trial of Ernst Kaltenbrunner, Reinhard Heydrich’s successor as head of the Reichssicherheitshauptamt (Central Office for Security of the Reich—RSHA), and was then confined to the administrative

aspects. The tribunal tried to ascertain who had been responsible for the directives and decisions that were implemented during the evacuation of the camps, and who devised the satanic schemes whereby prisoners in several concentration camps were to be liquidated by explosives, poison, or aerial bombing before the liberating armies arrived. Even in 1946, when the Allied occupying powers tried war criminals who had served in the concentration camps, the death marches were scarcely mentioned in the context of genocide. The Americans tried the criminals from Dachau, Flossenbürg, Mauthausen, Buchenwald, and Mittelbau-Dora; the British tried perpetrators from Bergen-Belsen and Ravensbrück; and the Soviets brought the Sachsenhausen murderers to trial. Whenever the evacuations were mentioned, the prosecution almost always tried to clarify who bore responsibility for creating the chaotic situation in the course of which thousands of inmates had perished. Naturally enough, the defendants, particularly if the camp commandant was among them, tried to shift responsibility to others.

Oswald Pohl, who headed the SS-Wirtschafts- und Verwaltungshauptamt (Central Office for Economics and Administration—WVHA—of the SS (Schutzstaffel—Protective Squadrons) for several years, was directly responsible for the concentration camp system during the liquidation stage. But even at Pohl's trial, focus was on the administrative responsibilities and the command hierarchy. Pohl disclaimed responsibility for the catastrophic evacuation conditions and for the murder of prisoners and tried to shelter behind his authority in such areas as economic management of the SS. He tried to shift blame for the camps in general and the evacuations in particular upward to Heinrich Himmler, chief of the German police and the SS, or downward to the head of the Inspectorate of Concentration Camps (Inspektion der Konzentrationslager—IKL), Richard Glücks.

It is doubtful whether the legal system that tried Nazi criminals in the postwar years could have dealt with the death marches from any angle other than clarification of responsibility for the orders to evacuate or preparations for that evacuation. All the legal discussions and the records they exposed were of inestimable importance for understanding the system and its functioning during the last months of the war, but they did not trace the fate of the prisoners after the evacuation of the camps. We must seek elsewhere for the answer to the question of what occurred in the convoys as they deteriorated into protracted death marches, the identities and motives of the murderers and the victims, and the reaction of Polish, German, or Austrian civilian populations to the advent of hundreds of thousands of evacuees. Needless to say, the same is true of the attempt to understand the reactions and coping methods of the prisoners themselves during the death marches.

On the other hand, in later trials and legal investigations conducted in the Deutsche Demokratische Republik (German Democratic Republic—DDR) or in Austria, the phenomenon of liquidations during the evacuations and death marches was discussed. Hundreds of inquiries regarding the murder and abuse of evacuated prisoners were conducted in the last four decades of the twentieth century. Testimonies were recorded, witnesses were interrogated, and reports on mass graves discovered along the evacuation routes were examined scrupulously. This abundant documentary material is important for several reasons. It enables us to look closely at local incidents of murder of prisoners or, in several cases, at incidents of mass slaughter during the death marches. It is of vital significance, particularly in the case of the nameless murderers, those who escorted columns of evacuated prisoners, but it is, by its very nature, of limited use for comprehension of a wider range of issues.

Without the testimony of the survivors, it is impossible to fathom a major part of what occurred during the death marches. It is interesting to note that in the first projects that collated testimonies—for example, those collected from camp survivors in Budapest in 1945 or the testimonies recorded by the American-Jewish psychiatrist David Boder in 1946 during his tour of Europe—the interviewees talked about this period. Over the years, tens of thousands of testimonies of Jewish and non-Jewish survivors relating to the evacuations and death marches have been added. This vast reserve of documentary material, collected by many sources and stored in archives all over the world, fills out the picture of the death marches from an angle that other sources do not cover.

In view of the abundance of documentary material it is even more surprising that the final stage of Nazi genocide has been merged into the overall extermination policy of previous years or into the state of chaos that prevailed in Germany in the last months of the war. However, several attempts have been made to deal with the phenomenon and the period in general separately and methodically.

From the mid-1960s, three striking historiographic projects attempted to examine the death marches from a comprehensive perspective. About a year after the war, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) Central Tracing Bureau published a three-part documentary compilation of great import, containing summaries, sketches of routes, and estimates of the number of victims murdered on some 110 death marches. While the information in these summaries is partial and the data are not necessarily precise, the very fact that information was collected by an international body indicates that the horrors of the camp evacuations were not unknown and had not been forgotten. On the basis of these facts, two Czech researchers published a book in the mid-1960s about the death marches, a pioneering

work that stood almost alone for many years.⁷ This book, however, is limited to statistical summaries and to description of the evacuation routes and does not tackle the larger questions of the period. An additional study was conducted in the late 1980s by the Polish researcher Zygmunt Zonik, who published a book on the evacuation of the camps. Zonik, himself a former inmate of a Nazi concentration camp, surveyed the legal examinations of the camp evacuations in Germany and Poland. He provided his readers with a valuable summary of the decision-making processes in the camp system on the eve of the evacuation and showed the various routes along which the convoys of prisoners marched westward and eastward.⁸ But he tells us almost nothing about the murderers and the victims or about the social and political infrastructure within which massacres occurred in the final stages of the war.

In the past 15 years, research on the Nazi concentration camps has greatly expanded. The general monographs, quite a few of them written by researchers who had themselves been inmates of the camps they described and who sometimes included their personal narratives in the analysis, were succeeded by studies by a young generation of scholars, in particular Germans. Wide-ranging books about a series of concentration camps have gradually begun to appear, based on extensive archival documentation from diverse sources. But even in these important studies, the last chapter—the annals of the evacuations and the death marches—has been overshadowed by the other atrocities inflicted on the prisoners. Generally speaking, this period has been treated as an epilogue to the history of the camp rather than as a major part of its history, which is of course true from the chronological aspect. The exceptions are Auschwitz, Ravensbrück, and Mittelbau-Dora, each the subject of a monograph that focuses solely on the evacuation and liberation of the camp.⁹ All these valuable studies view the death marches from a different, more or less wider angle, but do not extend their discussion beyond the specific camp. All, without exception, perpetuated an important methodological fact whose origins can be discerned in the postwar concentration camp trials: namely, discussion of the death marches and evacuations as part and parcel of the history of the Nazi concentration camps. In books and at scholarly gatherings in the past decade that have attempted to cast new, comprehensive light on the concentration camps and their place in the Nazi regime, the final chapter is always devoted to the evacuations.¹⁰ The connection drawn between the death marches and the final closing of the camp gates behind the prisoners and camp guards hampered study of this historical phenomenon from a different angle: namely, its association, marked by both similarities and differences, with the Nazi genocide activity that began in 1941 and ended with Germany's surrender.

The scholar who made a pioneering attempt to conduct such an inquiry in the mid-1990s was Daniel Goldhagen. He devotes two chapters of his controversial book to the death marches,¹¹ and perceives them as a component in the range of murder techniques adopted by the Nazis in implementing their Final Solution policy. He claims that the Nazis employed death marches against the Jews as a liquidation technique from the beginning of the German occupation of Poland. Indeed, in more than one case the German occupation authorities transferred Jews from one place to another as part of their policy of mobilization and deportation of the population within the resettlement programs and demographic engineering project devised by Himmler and the SS command in 1939–1941. Hundreds of Jews perished in December 1939 in one of the deadliest incidents, when they were deported from Chełm and Hrubieszów to territories under Soviet control.

However, it is precisely this horrific event that highlights the difference between the deportations of the early war years and the period of the death marches toward the end of the war. On December 1, 1939, some 2,000 Jewish men were ordered to assemble in the central square of Chełm, and that afternoon a group of SS men began to march them toward the Soviet border. The wives of the deportees, who wanted to join them, were driven back by force by the Germans. The death march lasted all day and that night, and toward morning the column reached Hrubieszów. According to the testimony of survivors, between 200 and 800 Jews were murdered in the course of the march. Another 2,000 Jewish men assembled in Hrubieszów on December 2, on orders from the Germans, and joined the group from Chełm. The death march continued for another two days, and on December 4 the survivors were forced to cross the River Bug while Soviet soldiers on the far bank fired at them to prevent them from entering Soviet-controlled territory. The Jews who crossed the river were rounded up by the Russian soldiers, who then drove them back forcibly to the German-ruled area.¹²

The death march of the Jews of Chełm and Hrubieszów was more closely connected to the period of stabilization of the border between the Soviet and German-controlled areas, and cannot, in any respect, be linked to the murder of Jews in the following years. Local Germans feared that a wide-scale Jewish presence in the towns and villages in the Lublin area of the German-Soviet border posed a threat because of their sympathy and support for the Red Army, as often occurred when Soviet troops occupied towns in eastern Poland. The fact that only the men were deported and the women were left behind confirms the assumption that this move was not part of a liquidation scheme but was rather the savage application of a political and military decision. But since the objects were Jews, there was no special reason to refrain from killing those who tried to escape or collapsed

by the wayside. As we know, tens of thousands of Jews were deported to the Generalgouvernement (the general government of occupied Poland) in the early years of the occupation of Poland from territories that had been annexed to the Reich, as well as from dozens of towns and villages in other parts of Poland. These deportations were carried out in a brutal and an inflexible manner, and there were countless cases of abuse and of looting of the deportees' property. Although there were also incidents of murder, no planned mass slaughter took place.¹³ Any interpretation of this period as the prologue to the official extermination policy, or as a series of impulsive and spontaneous acts on the part of certain Germans in remote locations who were yearning to liquidate Jews, is somewhat far-fetched.

As a second period, Goldhagen proposes 1941–1944, the period when the extermination of the Jews was proceeding apace. But he refrains from citing examples and evidence of liquidation of Jews during the years of the Final Solution by what he denotes “the institution of the march.” This period was characterized by the murder of other, non-Jewish victims by the technique of force-marching them hundreds of miles and murdering those who collapsed or were unable to endure the hardships of the march. First and foremost among these were hundreds of thousands of Soviet POWs who were taken captive by the Germans in late 1941 and early 1942.¹⁴ Jews were not generally marched to their deaths in the peak years of the Final Solution; they were murdered close to home or were transported by train from the stations in their hometowns or ghettos to murder sites chosen for the purpose.

The last few months of the war, when the Third Reich was in the throes of its final decline, marked the third period of exploitation of this extermination technique. It was no longer possible to employ the previous techniques, mostly because the constraints of the war mandated the need to withdraw from the concentration and death camps. Killing in the course of evacuation was now the sole extermination technique. The Germans no longer had full control of the timetable of murder, since it was the advance of the victorious forces rather than Nazi initiative that dictated events. There were three subperiods within this period: the first began in summer 1944 with the commencement of the retreats and evacuations from eastern Poland and the Baltic states; the second was launched in January 1945 with the evacuation of the large camps in Poland; and the third began in March 1945 with the onset of the evacuations carried out on German soil and continued until the final surrender. This is indeed the accepted classification among researchers with regard to the stages in camp evacuation.¹⁵

However, the history of the concentration camps does not necessarily coincide with that of the Final Solution. The historiography of the camp

evacuations beginning in summer 1944 does not enlighten us as to the murderous motivation of the killers and the bureaucratic apparatus that activated the extermination. It only serves to elucidate the last chapter in the annals of the concentration camps in Nazi Germany, which operated from 1933 to the evacuations in 1945. The death marches cannot be explained as the ultimate act of ideologically motivated murder within the framework of the Final Solution, on the basis of the evacuation stages that were determined mainly by administrative, economic, and above all military constraints.

The main problem, however, which calls for precise analysis and evaluation of the final stages of Nazi genocide, is not related to periodization. It stems to a considerable degree from the fact that the victims were no longer divided along such clear lines as before. The victims of the final stage were no longer solely Jews and, in many cases, not even mainly Jews—hence the difficulty in positioning this period within the framework of the Final Solution. Any approach that views this period as a stage in the extermination process not only creates a flawed historical explanation, but also undermines our perception of the Jews as a large and unique group of victims in the final stages of the extermination because it downplays the fact that the circle of victims had now expanded to include other nationalities. Also impeded is our ability to probe the motivation and circumstances of the liquidation, the various groups of murderers, the political circumstances in which it occurred, and the social infrastructure that supported it. Any attempt to explain the death marches solely from the perspective of the various stages of the Final Solution inevitably leads to selective choice of the events to be examined.

The present book, therefore, views the death marches not only as part of the history of the concentration camps or as the concluding chapter of the Final Solution, but mainly as the last period of Nazi genocidal activity. It takes as wide a view as possible of the period. Consequently, the treatment of the death marches is not confined to the marches of concentration camp inmates but it also examines several death marches of other prisoners. However, the central role of concentration camp inmates cannot be ignored because, in the final analysis, they accounted for the majority of the victims. Hence there is a need to understand the attitude of the Nazi terror machine toward the concentration camp prisoners in the last stages of the war, as well as the motives both of those who hindered the murderous activity and those who promoted it.

The term “death march” itself is devoid of political or ideological meaning. The liquidation of a defenseless population during their transfer from place to place in what is defined as a death march was not, of course, invented by the Nazis. Two striking cases of genocide in the early twentieth century—that of

the Herero tribe in Namibia by the German Imperial Army in 1904 and that of the Armenians by the Turks during World War I—were perpetrated by this method. Murders during evacuations and deportations also occurred, as noted, during the first years of World War II, and the victims were Jews, Soviet POWs, or other population groups. But in all the periods of Nazi genocide before summer–fall 1944, the death march was only one of many terror or liquidation techniques employed by the murderers, and usually not even the most common one.

Unlike previous studies, this book analyzes the death marches of the end of the war not as a murder technique that served a political or local security need, but as a separate chapter in the annals of Nazi genocide activity, with its own unique characteristics. My basic premise is that, in this period, almost all and certainly most of the previous characteristics of Nazi genocide underwent change: namely, the political and social infrastructure within which it occurred, the identity of the killers, the supervisory apparatus and bureaucratic administration, the liquidation techniques, the choice of liquidation sites, and, above all, the ideological categorization of the victims.

I have not attempted to provide a detailed description of all the death marches in areas under Nazi control from summer–fall 1944 to the end of the war. This task would be beyond the capacities of an individual researcher, for there were thousands of routes, some stretching across Europe for thousands of miles and others only several dozen miles long. There is almost no extant information in many cases. The means of evacuation were varied: some prisoners were transported by rail, by truck, or on horse-drawn wagons, others proceeded on foot, and most marches were combinations of two or three methods. The motorized or pedestrian convoys joined up with other evacuation marches that set out from nearby camps, split up, dispersed, and met up again with others, all this in accordance with the conditions that prevailed along the routes. Any attempt to impose cartographic order on the multi-headed Hydra was condemned to failure. I have chosen to present as wide and representative a range of death marches and evacuation routes as possible, wherever a reasonable amount of documentation was available. Together, they provide an accurate and a representative picture, as I see it, of this cruel and complex historical period.

To the same extent, the attempt to arrive at the precise number of victims of this concluding chapter of Nazi genocide cannot end in well-founded conclusions. Generally speaking, any attempt to determine the number of those who perished or were murdered in the concentration camp network, even if we exclude those liquidated in the special extermination camps and installations of the Final Solution, must be considered problematic. Cautious estimates set the number of prisoners who died in the camps between

1933 and 1945 at 1.1 million out of the 1.65 million who passed through their gates—in other words some 66 percent.¹⁶ For the period under discussion in this study, the data are even more indeterminate. Record keeping of the entry of prisoners into the system, their transfer from camp to camp, and lists of deaths and executions was generally lax in the last year of the war. It is even more difficult to estimate how many victims were murdered during the evacuations. Any such venture leads to an impasse or confronts us with implausible discrepancies. Even in cases where the number of prisoners who set out from an evacuated camp was recorded, by the time the convoy reached the destination camp, its composition had changed completely. Many prisoners were murdered or died during the evacuation, while others were added when two or three columns were combined. The figures noted in the files of the destination camps in spring 1945 were far from accurate, and the vast numbers of prisoners who arrived from the East, together with the prevailing disorder, precluded any possibility of accurate recording.

Data on the number of prisoners liquidated along the way was obtained from two sources. The first was the testimony of the survivors of the death march or the estimates provided by those who accompanied the convoy. The second source was the mass graves and sites of murder uncovered by the local population or by commissions of inquiry established after the war for purposes of identifying the victims buried in those graves. The figures cited by either the survivors or the murderers cannot of course serve as the basis for accurate numerical evaluation, and countless burial sites will remain unmarked forever. It is obvious that combining data on several death marches will affect calculations of the percentage of victims, which can range from 30 to 50 percent of the total number of prisoners.¹⁷ The same is true even with regard to some of the marches examined in this book, where the existing data can be considered reliable. On several death marches the proportion of prisoners murdered was as high as 80 percent, on others 20 percent or less. The total number of victims naturally varies from case to case. With all the necessary caution, I found no evidence to justify a different evaluation from that which estimates the number of victims of the death march of the concentration camp prisoners at 35 percent, namely, approximately 250,000 out of the total number of prisoners in the system at the beginning of 1945. If one also takes into account the victims of the last massacre of camp inmates or prisoners in other coercive frameworks, the number will of course be higher, but then the measured target population must be altered. In any event, this finding only serves to highlight the unparalleled murderous brutality of the last period of Nazi genocide: at least one quarter of the victims of the concentration camp system, which operated for some 12 years, perished in the last five months of its existence.

That being said, it is clear that the precise number of victims of this final stage will remain unknown.

This study is composed of two parts. The first is devoted to the political and systemic history of the period of the death marches. Its six chapters examine how the concentration camp system, detention facilities, and labor camps reached the evacuation stage and how the evacuations turned into lethal death marches. The chapters deal with events in chronological order, from summer 1944 to spring 1945, with emphasis on the military, social, and political circumstances of the period. Special attention is devoted to the central theme of this entire study—the identity of the murderers, characterization of the victims by their killers, and the reaction of the prisoners to the events.

The second part studies the death marches from the angle accepted for more than two decades in historical research in general, including the study of Nazi genocide, namely, social history viewed “from below.” At the heart of these four chapters is a study of German society at a time when most of the last stage of Nazi genocide was being perpetrated on the doorsteps of the local population. This part deals extensively with several massacres of prisoners that occurred in civilian settlements in Germany in spring 1945, and in particular the central, dramatic incident that was, to a large degree, representative of the entire phenomenon: the massacre in Gardelegen in April 1945. The aim of this microhistorical examination is to comprehend what happened in the world of ordinary citizens, their insights into the period in which they lived, their attitudes and reactions to what was being perpetrated before their eyes. The heart of the discussion is examination of the period and the outpouring of murderous brutality that characterized it from the viewpoint of those who witnessed it and occasionally joined in. However, this particular event in Gardelegen was far from being over in 1945. For many years, this small town in north-central Germany, which was part of the DDR until 1990, continued to wrestle with the issue of memory and commemoration and the question of how to confront its painful history.

As we know, the history of everyday life (*Alltagsgeschichte*) generally requires long-term scrutiny of the society under investigation. This is not the case here, since the period of the death marches was brief and replete with crises. Questions have often been raised as to the patterns of life and survival of German society under the Nazi dictatorship. Did the majority continue to live a normative and normal life at the time? The period under study in this book was marked by the close encounter of German society with the genocide instigated by the Nazi regime. This fact leads us to ask: Is it possible to identify normalcy and normative patterns in German society during the collapse of the Third Reich?

The assumption that the Nazi dictatorship did not utterly destroy the patterns of life, the social interactions, and the community and family ties of a society that continued to live its everyday life is controverted by the disintegration of that society toward the end of the war. The death marches occurred at a time when a dictatorship, which for years had pursued a violent and murderous policy of persecution and extermination on racial, political, and social grounds toward enemies both at home and abroad, was reaching its end. Examination of the modes of reaction and coping of the establishment, both the individual and the social system that were involved, in those final months of the genocide activity, in countless circles of life and involvement patterns, is the core of this book.

The Concentration Camps, 1933–1944

In 1945 Eugen Kogon, a former prisoner at Buchenwald, published a pioneering study that attempted to tackle the world of the concentration camps, which he called *Der SS-Staat* (The SS-State). As early as the first months after the liberation, Kogon defined the centrality of the concentration camp world in the annals of the Third Reich and its underlying aims:

Their main purpose was the elimination of every trace of potential opposition to Nazi rule. Segregation, debasement, humiliation, extermination—those were the effective forms of the terror. Any concept of justice was put aside. Better to put ten innocents behind barbed wire than to let one real enemy escape.¹

When the Allied forces reached the Nazi concentration camps at the end of World War II, and information and photographs were released from Dachau, Bergen-Belsen, and Buchenwald, Western public opinion was stunned. Information on the appalling situation in the camps had already been circulated during the war, and the liberation of Majdanek and Auschwitz by the Red Army in 1944 and 1945 had revealed to the West what had been perpetrated there. Yet, the depth and extent of the atrocities committed in the final months of the war, as exposed in the liberated camps in Germany, had previously been unknown. The piles of corpses, the skeleton-thin survivors, the sick and the dying, the stinking, densely crammed barracks—all these were beyond imagination. The scenes photographed by American and British soldiers and by the war correspondents who accompanied the troops in Germany appeared in the newspapers and in cinema newsreels. The information was also displayed intensively to the German

civilian population as part of the policy of “showing them what happened,” which was adopted by the American and British occupation authorities.²

The perception of the concentration camp system as the symbol of criminality and as the ultimate representation of the iniquitous nature of the Nazi regime—as confirmed by the shocking visualization of atrocity and death—helps explain why, for a considerable period, the camps were not a focus of historical research. This avoidance also stemmed from the fact that the descriptions of the appalling acts committed within them raised the question: what, apart from the totality of the abomination, was there to investigate? Postwar historians, particularly in Germany, showed no interest in this subject. Suppression, forced labor, and death in concentration camps were extraneous to what was considered to be of scholarly value, according to accepted historical tradition. Hence, for many years, the history of the concentration camps was written not by professional historians but by former prisoners. While still imprisoned in the camps, these prisoners felt that their story must be told to the world and that it was incumbent on them to tell it. The first reports and memoirs of survivors appeared during the war and immediately afterward. Several of them evoked widespread public interest; others sank into oblivion.³ Some of them contain, in addition to a personal narrative, a partial theoretical analysis of the concentration camp world from the viewpoint of the ideology, bureaucracy, economics, and politics of the Third Reich. This is true of Eugen Kogon’s book about his lengthy imprisonment in Buchenwald, and of a study of a similar nature published in 1946 by Benedikt Kautsky, who was also a Buchenwald inmate.⁴ Kogon and Kautsky were prominent members of the underground in Buchenwald, and the issue of resistance naturally played an important part in their books. Another example is the book by Erwin Gostner, a former inmate of Dachau, Mauthausen, and Gusen, which also appeared a year after the war and tells the story of his experiences in those camps. He too combines his personal story with a wider description of the camp and its functioning.⁵ In a book about his two years in Buchenwald and Neuengamme, David Rousset, a Trotskyite activist in France before the war, tried to understand the characteristics of the society that existed there and their relevance to the totalitarian regime.⁶ As the years went by, thousands of volumes, anthologies, and memorial albums written by camp survivors were published in a number of languages.

In Israel the first book of this type, containing the testimony of Jewish prisoners from Auschwitz, appeared in 1957. It gave a narrative description of the lives of the survivors, most of them members of the Jewish resistance movement in the camp. The personal narratives of this book are blended with preliminary historical analysis of the place of the Jews in the Nazis’ main concentration and death camps. The main author and editor of this

volume was Israel Gutman, later a doyen of Holocaust historiography, who was active in the Jewish resistance in the camp.⁷ Despite the specific angle of this book, which depicts the unique fate of Jewish prisoners, its similarity to works by non-Jewish prisoners is greater than its dissimilarity. Like all such works that appeared in the first postwar decade, it focused mainly on direct revelation of the inner world of the camp prisoners. It discussed the prison society, and the internal hierarchy, the forced labor, the starvation, the struggle for survival and for preservation of humanity, and it dwelled on the constant presence of death.

One of the first attempts to formulate a theory of the concentration camp world from the starting point of the attributes of the terror practiced by the totalitarian regime was made by Hannah Arendt several years after the war. Since research on the subject had scarcely begun, she based her study mainly on the writings of survivors such as Rousset and Kogon. Arendt perceives the concentration camp as one of the most consistent institutions of totalitarian rule and identifies a number of characteristics of the camp system: isolation, negation of identity, detachment from the past, absence of the profit component and of rational economic management of the labor system, eradication of the juridical person, and murder of the moral person. However, Arendt asserts, the survivors' descriptions of a chaotic system of death and terror marked by appalling inefficiency should not mislead us. While the overt unavailing cynicism of the camps is plainly evident, in practice they, more than any other state institution, constituted a highly logical mechanism for perpetuating the power of the regime.⁸

Intensive historical research on the camps did not begin until the mid-1980s. Ulrich Herbert, Karin Orth, and Christoph Dieckmann believe that this long delay occurred because of the disturbing discrepancy between the constant presence of the concentration camps in political and public discourse in Germany and the actual availability of information about them. The prisoners' generation was dying out, and those members of the young generation who undertook to keep memories alive concentrated on investigating and examining the impact of the Nazi dictatorship on the places where they lived. The shift to local and social research on the Nazi period and the move away from analysis of its general political aspects led a new generation of researchers to study the subcamps of the larger concentration camps, to which almost no attention had previously been devoted. This research gave a first glimpse of the central role of the concentration camps in the armaments industry, the links between senior economic concerns and the SS, and the vital importance of slave labor for the economy of Nazi Germany.⁹

In 1993 the sociologist Wolfgang Sofsky published his book *Die Ordnung des Terrors: Das Konzentrationslager*.¹⁰ For the first time a scholar

was offering an explanation for the construction and operation of a system whose purpose was murderous oppression, based on and functioning by means of terror, which Sofsky calls *absolute Macht* (absolute power). The objective of his study, he wrote, was to create a “thick description” (*dichte Beschreibung*) of the brutal world of the concentration camps. In methodological terms, he states, “thick descriptions” are diagnoses of meaning. They do not provide lists of facts but rather interpretations of activities and situations—not reports but explanations of structures and processes.¹¹

According to Sofsky, the concentration camps created a form of power and authority whose social components differed in essence from any of the accepted forms of power. Absolute power in no way resembles the power that is wielded by a tyrannical emissary, a dictatorial regime, or any other entity that employs political aggression. It is a force that extends its authority over its victims only after they are no longer capable of resisting, and its aim is not to break resistance. It is a force whose violence is free of restraints and limitations, and it is reinforced by the organizational system that operates it. Absolute power, says Sofsky, begins at the point where the terror of tyranny or dictatorship ends. Its objective is not to enforce total obedience or blind toeing of the line but to create a universe of total uncertainty.¹² Starting from this premise and relying widely on the testimony and memories of prisoners, Sofsky describes and elucidates a series of situations from life in the concentration camps: deportation, arrival at the camp, feeding and starvation, labor, torture, punishment, the activities of prisoner functionaries, the conduct of the guards, and so on. What emerges from Sofsky’s book is a harsh, disquieting, and extraordinarily profound description. He does not deal with a specific camp but rather with the history of the concentration camps within a timeless and placeless sociological structure,¹³ at the core of which lies the existential experience of those housed in them, prisoners and staff. Yet, despite the fact that the basic components of this system, which Sofsky diagnosed so perceptively, were present throughout its existence, one cannot survey the history of the camp system as a totality. It underwent changes over the years until the final stage of its existence during the evacuations and death marches.

The Years of Formation and Consolidation, 1933–1939

In the first stage of the Nazi regime, approximately up to summer 1934, various detention camps and centers sprang up throughout Germany.¹⁴ These 90 or so camps and installations,¹⁵ where political opponents of the regime were detained, were organized by the SA (Sturmabteilung—Storm Battalions), the local police, or the SS (Schutzstaffel—Protective Squadrons). By summer

1933 more than 26,000 individuals had been imprisoned in these detention centers, which were located in remote chateaus, abandoned army camps, or prisons.¹⁶ This initial stage of Nazi rule was marked by an uncompromising struggle against all those perceived as political foes, and tens of thousands were incarcerated in those early camps. This phenomenon was by no means unique to the Nazi regime; it has characterized the early consolidation stages of various totalitarian regimes, such as the Soviet Union, especially when the Stalinist dictatorship began to gain momentum in the late 1920s. But in contrast to the Nazi camps, in the Soviet Union the establishment of the vast prison network was accompanied by economic calculations.¹⁷ The Nazi camps, on the other hand, served to promote the racial state to which the new order aspired. From the outset, Jews who were imprisoned in these camps were the target of particularly violent and brutal treatment.¹⁸

The man who was given full authority by Heinrich Himmler to build and shape this terror system was Theodor Eicke. It was Eicke who established the concentration camp network and recruited and trained the manpower that managed and operated it. To a large extent, the Nazi concentration camp, and in particular its ideology, was his creation.

Eicke was born in 1892 in Alsace into a working-class family. He was forced to leave school at an early age because of his poor scholastic record. He was only 17 when he joined the army in 1913, fought in World War I, and won two medals for bravery. Like many extreme right activists in Weimar Germany, he could not find a niche for himself after the war. The trauma of defeat and his sense of humiliation, which persisted throughout the 1920s, impelled him to join the Nazi Party in 1928. Two years later he joined the SS, and that organization became his path to a professional career and the place where he could give vent to his political views. Himmler, who regarded him as one of his closest associates and trusted him implicitly, appointed him commander of an SS unit in 1931. In this position, two of Eicke's character traits came into play: independence and unwillingness to accept outside authority. He often clashed with party functionaries because of his refusal to accept their authority over the SS, which he considered an elite unit, exempt from following the procedures of the parliamentary regime under which the party operated. The SS, he believed, owed loyalty solely to the revolutionary concept, to the Führer, and to the supreme commander of the organization, Himmler.¹⁹

In late June 1933 Himmler appointed Eicke commandant of the first concentration camp he set up, located at Dachau in Bavaria. Only three months earlier the first group of 96 prisoners had been brought to an abandoned factory structure close to this small Bavarian town.²⁰ This camp was one of the series of concentration camps that sprouted in the period of savage political

terror after the Nazi rise to power. The guards assigned there were members of the SS, mainly from Munich. They were familiar with the use of terror and violence toward political enemies, and regarded as such the prisoners placed in their charge in the new detention center. The first camp commandant, Hilmar Wäckerle, failed to prevent the growing number of deaths resulting from the guards' abuse and brutality. The stories of what occurred in Dachau leaked out and excited a wave of public protest, mainly in Bavaria. Himmler could not permit himself scandals of this type in those first months of the Nazi Party's supreme effort to stabilize its rule. Eicke's mission was to impose order in the new camp and to stabilize it.²¹

Eicke was not only a veteran Nazi and a fervent believer. He was also an excellent administrator and a man of action, and the bureaucratic aspects of his efficient management, for which he was careful to obtain constant official authorization, were reflected in a document he sent Himmler on October 1, 1933. In this document he discussed the pretexts for punishment of Dachau prisoners, the forms this punishment took, and the behavioral code for the camp personnel. Punctiliously, he listed the types of felonies to be punished by imprisonment and the number of days of detention for each type. He detailed the rules of conduct binding prisoners and the punishments to be inflicted for infringement. In a number of cases the punishment was to be augmented by 25 lashes. The rules also covered felonies for which the punishment was death. Eicke's document also granted the camp commandants wide scope for action, based on strict adherence to clearly defined rules rather than arbitrary instructions as before, all this in order to deal with those classified as enemies of the state (*Staatsfeinde*). The uniform model Eicke devised and developed in Dachau became the model for future concentration camps. The provisional detention facilities, run arbitrarily by SA thugs, were replaced gradually by Eicke's model: an organized system, run according to explicit rules. These rules included directives as to the work, rest, and meal schedules for the guards, the composition of the meals, the rigid daily schedule of the prisoners, as well as instructions on the structure of the camp and its functional internal division and the number of bunks in each wooden hut.²²

The personnel recruited into the camp system underwent a selection process, were accorded special attention by Eicke, and were regarded from the outset as an elite unit. They saw themselves not just as jailers and prison guards but, above all, as soldiers in the service of the nation and the race. As far as they were concerned, the camp was a vitally important security installation rather than a prison. The prisoners were not simply criminals to them but political and ideological enemies. Rudolf Höß, later commandant of Auschwitz, who was assigned to Dachau in 1934 for his first training period,

described in his memoirs the new meaning his life took on when he was able, once again, to become a soldier in the service of the nation. The fact that the enemy he faced differed from the adversary he had encountered on the World War I battlefields was of merely marginal significance to him. Like Höß, almost all those who later made up the senior command and administration of the Waffen-SS (the military force of the SS) and the concentration camp system, received their training in Eicke's Dachau.²³

Das Modell Dachau, which Eicke designed, was adopted by Himmler in summer 1934 when it was decided to establish the Inspektion der Konzentrationslager—(Inspectorate of Concentration Camps—IKL) and to place Eicke at its head.²⁴ The IKL was a typical German bureaucratic system, characterized by modern rational modes of operation, which took into consideration operative outlay, expenditure per prisoner, the cost of building maintenance, guarding, and the like. It was a typical example of a modern bureaucratic network operating an extensive terror network in the service of the political needs of a ruling ideology.²⁵ The IKL was a small administrative unit²⁶ and was directly answerable to Himmler. Its modus operandi was later adapted to facilitate its natural integration into the economic and administration system of the SS.

Eicke and the IKL apparatus organized and built up the concentration camp system between 1934 and 1936. However, the IKL was not established solely in order to formulate uniform and lucid standards of functioning for political detention centers directed against enemies of the state. Its main purpose was to remove handling of these prisoners from the traditional legal frameworks that dealt with felons, namely, the local police and the law courts, and to entrust it to the SS. By 1936 the traditional supervisory and judicial authorities wielded almost no influence over what occurred in the concentration camps. In any event, at that time the number of prisoners was still relatively low; in 1934/1935 it was less than 4,000.²⁷

The year 1936 was the turning point in the development of the concentration camp system. New camps were set up, new objectives were added, and the composition of the prison population was changed. The regime had succeeded, in a relatively short time, in almost completely eradicating the activity of its opponents, so that now the conditions were ripe for waging a struggle against those elements in society that were undermining the healthy foundations of the nation. Classification of enemies of the state and society was problematic because the Nazis had never formulated a comprehensive definition of the term “political enemy” or criteria distinguishing such enemies from racially inferior and antisocial elements or habitual criminals. Jews, for example, were first and foremost a racial threat, but they were also perceived as dangerous political enemies because of their strong influence within the

communist movement and on the political life of the Western democracies. Political prisoners, especially communists, were described in party propaganda as criminals threatening the integrity of the community, the harmony of the family cell, and the immunity of the social organism. Habitual criminals were often treated as a racial threat because of the danger that their offspring would follow in their footsteps. They were also perceived as a political threat who, for reasons of expediency and out of criminal calculations, participated in violent revolutionary action. The common denominator of all these groups was their classification as “community aliens” and a threat to the social order.²⁸

Various government bodies in Germany, notably the ministries of Justice, Economics, and the Interior as well as the security authorities, were involved in the administration of the camps and the prison population through the internal camp structure. Five departments (Abteilungen) dealt with matters such as SS personnel, prisoners, guard personnel, labor, and internal administration. Of particular importance was the Political Department (Abteilung II—Politische Abteilung), which was, in effect, a branch of the Gestapo in the camps. It supervised the prisoners who arrived at the camp, recorded the circumstances that had brought them there, conducted inquiries against prisoners when requested by the Gestapo or the Kripo (Kriminalpolizei—Criminal Police), and supervised executions in the camps. This was an outside unit that was not, in practice, under the camp command’s jurisdiction, but was (from 1939) subordinate to the RSHA.²⁹

The criminal code of the Third Reich was extended between 1936 and 1939 through the introduction of new definitions and criteria, which turned various groups of social misfits into enemies who were to be totally removed from society. To the political criminals, whose only crime was their ideological resistance to Nazism, who had been persecuted almost from the day that Hitler came to power, were now added new categories. Jehovah’s Witnesses were classified in 1933 as “enemies of the state” because of their non-conformist religious conduct and their refusal to adopt the new customs of the state—the Nazi salute and the oath of allegiance to the Führer—which ran counter to their own religious oaths. Also included in the new legal definition of dangerous criminals, namely, habitual offenders and irredeemable criminal personalities, were sex offenders and homosexuals.³⁰

In 1936 all these newly defined criminals, who were convicted in accordance with the amended German legal code, were sent to concentration camps. Most of them never reached the camps. Some 120,000 of them were placed in solitary confinement in punitive installations within prisons that, as a rule, were guarded and operated by the SA or the local police. Only about 4,700 of the new offenders reached concentration camps. The prison instal-

lations where they were held were not necessarily better than the concentration camps, and the conditions were rigorous. Even at the end of 1938, when the concentration camp system had grown and expanded, it still housed only about 13,000 inmates convicted of various social crimes, as against 101,000 prisoners in other installations. The mass transfer from prison installations to concentration camps would not occur until the first half of 1943.³¹

The transfer of these prisoners to the concentration camp system, albeit in limited numbers in the mid-1930s, was of great import to the SS. Himmler, supported by Hitler, made every effort to increase the number of new criminals in this category being sent to concentration camps,³² with two objectives in mind. The first was ideological: to set them apart from the healthy section of the German people. This objective was to be accomplished in order to boost the nation's racial vigor through sociobiological selection, which would separate the wheat from the chaff. Only concentration camps could fulfill this task, Himmler believed. The second objective was economic.

In summer 1936 a new concentration camp, Sachsenhausen, was established at Oranienburg north of Berlin. A prison installation and an SA camp already existed on the site, and hundreds of prisoners had been detained there in the months of unbridled terror in 1933–1934.³³ The first 50 prisoners reached the new camp in June 1936, and another 200 at the end of July.³⁴ The IKL regarded it as a new type of concentration camp, the first to be established on the basis of the infrastructure developed and the experience accumulated since the establishment of the office in 1934. The camp was also located close to a population center, in this case a town, and in 1938 the IKL was transferred from Dachau to Oranienburg. Because of the presence of an administrative center close to the camp, Oranienburg-Sachsenhausen became the new training center for concentration camp commandants. Rudolf Höß spent his last training period there before being dispatched in 1940 to Auschwitz to set up a camp there. Only at Oranienburg, he later wrote, did he learn how the concentration camp system operated from within and how it functioned in practice.³⁵

In Sachsenhausen and its subcamp, Neuengamme, established in 1938 near Hamburg (which became an independent camp in 1940), the attitude toward the issue of prisoners' labor began to change. This was the start of a lengthy evolving process that, toward the end of the war, was to transform the concentration camp system into a giant reservoir of slaves. Through their labor—labor that would kill tens of thousands of them—this workforce maintained a large part of the munitions industry and the war economy of the Third Reich.

Maintaining the connection between the slave labor of the concentration camps and the functioning of a rational economic system was by no means

a simple task. It could only be implemented through adoption, both ideologically and operatively, of economic principles that served as functional substitutes for the conventional capitalist economy. The theoretical basis of the economic approach espoused by National Socialism had been laid in the 1920s. The individual who exerted the strongest influence on its formulation and integration into the party's ideology was Gottfried Feder, a party member since 1920 and one of its main theoreticians in its formative years. It was he who devised the economic formula of "creative capital versus parasitic capital" (*schaffendes gegen raffendes Kapital*). Creative capital, as he saw it, promoted employment, social dynamism, and technological progress. Parasitic capital was that which was preoccupied with the narrow needs of the stratum of interest holders. Feder's theory was corroborated by other writers in the 1930s, who fostered a National Socialist model of ideal economics and technology. This model emphasized that only technological modernism based on racial superiority and force of will could withstand the titanic might of capitalist materialism and its total control by Jews. The combination of national capital, technology, and progressive bureaucracy with racial purity served as the foundation of the new economics that was to shatter the power of capitalist-Jewish materialism.³⁶

The SS, more than any other Nazi organization, took the theoretical basis of the new economics very seriously. Himmler, from the early days of the party's rule, envisaged the SS as the force propelling the Nazi ideal and the catalyst of the revolution that would integrate racial superiority and modernism into the German economy and society. According to this approach, the economy was bound, first and foremost, to serve the needs of the state and the *Volk* (the people), not those of commercial concerns and the free market. Creation of a modern national economy and a racially pure nation were tasks too formidable to be left to the proponents of the free market and the capitalist economy.³⁷ Years later, when Germany was immersed in a bloody battle for survival, Dr. Leo Volk, one of the SS's economic specialists, explained what had led the organization to enter the sphere of economic activity in the 1930s:

Why does the SS engage in business? The era of liberal economic system demanded the precedence of the economy and then of the State. . . . National Socialism maintains this point of view. *The State gives orders to the economy*; the State does not exist for the economy; but the economy exists for the benefit of the State. The activities of the Allies, which brought about the present World War confirmed the rightness of principles of National Socialist economic leadership, which introduced an economy controlled by the State as early as 1933. The economy had to face problems which under all circumstances had to be

solved in case war should break out. It was during this time that the economic enterprises of the SS were developed.³⁸

Oswald Pohl was the man Himmler recruited to build up the economy of the SS. Born in 1892, Pohl joined the navy after completing his studies in 1912; during World War I he served mainly in the Baltic Sea. After the war he became associated with the Volkisch (populist) right-wing circles, was active in the Freikorps (post–World War I paramilitary organizations), and in 1925 joined the Nazi Party and the SA. In 1933 he met Himmler and became one of the SS chief's closest associates. In 1939 Himmler established the Verwaltungs und Wirtschaftshauptamt (Administration and Business Main Office—VuWHA) and appointed Pohl its head, a position that effectively rendered Pohl the individual with the greatest influence in the SS after Himmler. The system Pohl headed, which was reorganized in 1942 in light of the war situation, was largely a prototype and an ideal of the new Nazi economic bureaucracy. Pohl and the henchmen he recruited considered themselves above all to be modern administrators in charge of a system that must be conducted along progressive lines, according to the rules of rational management, cost calculations, and profitability. All these should serve the new social order, the needs of the nation, and its political ideology. Most of the members of this small group of young men (Pohl was the oldest), had degrees in engineering, economics, or law. Many of them were from upper middle-class families, sons of physicians, lawyers, or senior civil servants. Pohl, a careerist motivated by ideology (*ideologisch motivierter Karrierist*), as Jan-Erik Schulte described him,³⁹ was the paradigm of this group: a veteran party member, a fervent and dedicated Nazi, as well as an organizer, and a professional in the spheres of economics and administration.

At this time the SS set up workshops and factories at Sachsenhausen and Neuengamme that manufactured bricks, roof tiles, or other construction materials. For the prisoners this was grueling labor, carried out under intolerable conditions. They worked in clay pits and next to primitive kilns without the proper machinery, and so productivity was low. This production line was of dubious worth and could scarcely be considered a model for modern industry. The bulk of the production in the camps at the time served the needs of monumental construction projects throughout Germany and was unconnected to the munitions industry. In 1937–1939, when Hitler brought his full weight to bear in order to promote the megalomaniac building schemes he envisaged in Berlin and elsewhere in Germany, the German economy was barely capable of supplying one quarter of the required building materials. Albert Speer, the architect responsible for realizing this vision, who was later appointed the Reich's Minister for Weapons, Munitions and Armament, was

among the instigators of the exploitation of concentration camp prisoners in the building material production industry.⁴⁰ This was the background for establishing the Deutsche Erd und Steinwerke (German Earth and Stone Works Company—DESt) in April 1938. The DESt soon became the main employer of concentration camp inmates. Its enterprises were located close to Mauthausen and, after war broke out, also at Groß-Rosen and Natzweiler-Struthof.⁴¹

The concentration camps' first involvement in economic projects, namely, in supplying manpower for building material production, also marked the beginning of a dispute that would accompany the issue of prisoners' labor until 1942–1943. This dispute was bound up with the power struggles between two senior members of the SS, Theodor Eicke and Oswald Pohl. But above all it was a controversy about the character and aims of the concentration camps in the Nazi state and the treatment of their inmates.

Eicke attributed little importance to the economic aspects of slave labor. He regarded labor mainly as a means of exerting authority over the enemies of the party and the state. As he saw it, forced labor should serve the aim of breaking the spirit of political resistance and subduing its supporters. In the early years of the camps, up to 1936, there was widespread opposition to employing prisoners on productive work. They were considered a negative and unreliable human element, incapable of living productive lives. The principles of productivity and rational management were of no interest whatsoever to the camp personnel. Eicke's men, the senior officers and the camp guards, were concerned almost solely with security needs and matters of discipline and the smooth operation of the terror apparatus they managed. They generally left issues of labor to the kapos in charge of the prisoners.⁴²

The camp world of Eicke and the men of his SS-Totenkopfverbände (Death's Head Unit) was a brutal one, with rigid schedules and savage punishments. It was self-contained and isolated from society, and this was true not only for the inmates but also for those who guarded them. It was a manifestly ideological system whose commandants and senior officers regarded themselves as warriors in the forefront of National Socialism's main battle, performing tasks that constituted a supreme historical mission. Inflexibility, group comradeship, and a sense of belonging to an elite order characterized this system.⁴³ Its responsibilities did not include running an orderly bureaucracy, calculations of input and outlay, organized follow-ups, or economic considerations. Rather, its core was the operation and administration of ideologically oriented terror. Such a framework could not function as a rational and effective bureaucracy even if it kept its files and data in good order.⁴⁴ For the Konzentrationslager-SS (camp-SS), the prisoners were dangerous enemies, a racially inferior rabble, parasites and corrupters of the social order

and morals, whose right to live was in question from the outset. Their exploitation as a valuable economic asset was irrelevant.

The grueling working conditions in the camps, such as Mauthausen, which was established in 1938 after the annexation of Austria, resulted in rising death rates. The low productivity rate of the factories that operated inside the camps indicates that attention to the prisoners' labor was not the main priority of the camp command. During the years when Pohl and Speer sought to exploit the prisoners in construction projects, the mortality rate soared. In 1940 it topped 20 to 30 percent in some camps.⁴⁵ Suppression and liquidation of enemy groups remained the prime aim of the camps. The weight of political and ideological considerations in managing the prisoners' labor did not change appreciably until Pohl was granted full responsibility for the concentration camps in 1942.

What did change in the camps, however, in the last prewar years was the composition of the camp population. The Gestapo, which began to be significantly involved in dispatching people to camps, was sending increasing numbers of prisoners convicted under the new criminal laws. These prisoners had been classified as shirkers, antisocial elements, or habitual criminals. On July 1, 1938, only 26 percent of the 7,723 prisoners in Buchenwald were political prisoners. Of these, 59 percent were classified as shirkers, 14 percent as habitual offenders, and 5 percent were Jehovah's Witnesses.⁴⁶ After war broke out, the system grew dramatically. By 1942 six camps had been established or had altered status: Stutthof,⁴⁷ Auschwitz, Neuengamme, Natzweiler-Struthof, Groß-Rosen, and Majdanek. This expansion brought with it a natural increase in the number of prisoners and a reevaluation of the system's needs and aims. It was also accompanied by changes in the structure of the IKL.

In summer 1938 the veteran members of Eicke's SS-Totenkopfverbände began to leave the camps. These guards, Eicke's loyal henchmen, on whom the Nazi terror system rested, were reassigned to combat units and participated in the fighting in Poland and later in France. Their replacements came from the SS. In the same period, Eicke also left the IKL and, in November 1939, moved on to command a Waffen-SS division that he soon transformed into a crack and elite fighting unit. Replacing him as supervisor of camps was Richard Glücks, a senior IKL officer at Oranienburg.⁴⁸

The Camps and the Vision of a Racial Empire, 1939–1941

After September 1939, Himmler's appointment as Reichskommissar für die Festigung deutschen Volkstums (Reich Commissar for the Strengthening of Germanism) marked the turning point in the revolutionary plan for German

settlement in the East. This project involved demographic engineering and future repositioning of hundreds of thousands of human beings within the Slavic settlements of eastern Europe. German farmers from the Baltic states, Rumania, and the Ukraine were to be settled in territories annexed to the Reich after the division of Poland, and millions of Poles and Jews were to be deported from these places to the Generalgouvernement established in Poland.⁴⁹ The development of this racial-colonial settlement empire called for building unprecedented projects and manpower reserves. The construction of new towns based on modern technological principles, the planning of up-to-date agriculture for German settlement projects, the establishment of a wide industrial and economic infrastructure—all these required hundreds of thousands of laborers. Oswald Pohl was placed in charge of administering the system that was designed to bring the future German racial empire into existence. The new concentration camps were intended to supply the necessary manpower.⁵⁰

Alongside these plans was the emergence of various security issues and the need to introduce a suppressive apparatus in occupied Poland. Auschwitz was established to solve the Nazis' security problems in the occupied territories while implementing their future imperialist schemes. The goals that Himmler and Heydrich set for Poland included the liquidation of the Polish intelligentsia, political activists, spiritual leaders, and senior bureaucracy. All these elements were to be liquidated or sent to concentration camps. During the wave of terror that engulfed Poland in the first months of the occupation, whose main victims were Jews and Poles, thousands of Poles⁵¹ were dispatched to camps in Germany or imprisoned in provisional camps in Poland. But toward the end of 1939 and in early 1940, these camps, some of them run by the army, began to close down as the period of military government came to an end in Poland. The situation in Silesia and in western Poland, which had been annexed to the Reich, was the most urgent. Tens of thousands of Poles were arrested there after the German forces entered, and the provisional prison installations no longer sufficed to meet needs.⁵²

At the end of 1939 Glücks received instructions from Himmler to examine the suitability of several prison installations and prison camps in the Reich and occupied territories in Poland for conversion into new concentration camps. Six such sites were examined, including the old Polish military installation at Auschwitz and the camp established by the Sicherheitsdienst—SD (Security Service) at Stutthof, not far from Danzig, in September 1939, which served the terror apparatus in operations directed against the regional Polish and Jewish populations.⁵³ In a report he sent Himmler in February 1940, Glücks estimated that Auschwitz could be a suitable site, following fundamental alterations and the construction of an appropriate in-

frastructure. The IKL commander rejected all the other installations, including Stutthof.⁵⁴

Glücks's report indicates how unaware he was of the new role Himmler was planning to assign to the concentration camp system. A narrow-minded bureaucrat, who operated from his office in Oranienburg, Glücks explained to the SS commander that the places he had examined lacked plumbing installations or running water, and in some places the buildings were unsuitable. In general, he reported, various properties were owned by private individuals or by the state. Himmler, for his part, envisaged millions of Poles and Jews being driven eastward beyond the areas of German settlement; his construction and expansion schemes were spread over 124,000 square miles (200,000 square kilometers), with hundreds of thousands of forced laborers implementing the plan. This new order in the East, with its economic and racial aspects, represented the very essence of the Nazi revolution as Himmler conceived it.⁵⁵

It was, of course, Himmler's vision that dictated the course of events. The number of prisoners began to rise rapidly after war broke out, and it soon doubled. In August 1939 there were 21,000 prisoners in concentration camps; two and a half years later, in early 1942, the number was 70,000 to 80,000. According to a report by Pohl, several camps underwent dramatic expansion. In Dachau in 1939 there were 4,000 prisoners, and by early 1942 the number had risen to 8,000: Sachsenhausen grew from 6,500 to 10,000 inmates; Flossenbürg, from 1,500 to 4,700; and Ravensbrück, from 2,500 to 7,500. In other camps, mainly those set up after the outbreak of war, none of which were included in Pohl's report, the process was even more dramatic. In May 1940, Auschwitz had 758 prisoners and by May 1942 more than 14,000. In Majdanek, the number increased in the first half of 1942 from 2,000 to around 10,000.⁵⁶

The composition of the prison population by nationality also changed after the war began. Widespread arrests, directed mainly against political activists in the occupied countries, brought various nationalities—Polish, French, Czech, Yugoslav, Dutch, Belgian, and others—from all over Europe to the camp system. In 1942 various nationalities from the Soviet Union also began to arrive. Whereas the German prisoners had been almost the sole national group in the camps until 1939, they gradually became the minority.⁵⁷

This system, whose main purpose was terror and the elimination of enemies, found it difficult to change its modes of operation and to convert itself into a framework for exploiting cheap manpower, all in the name of establishing a great empire in the East. Pohl and his henchmen understood clearly that if they wanted to improve labor efficiency and thereby achieve the Reich's economic and political goals, they would have to appoint their own people to run the camps. To this end, a special bureau, I/5, was established in

1940 in Section 1 of Pohl's organization, whose task was the placement and management of prisoner manpower. Officers from I/5 were posted to the camps in order to act together with the camp command and administer labor.⁵⁸ However, administrative planning carried out from an office desk in Oranienburg was unable to revolutionize a system that had been operating for seven years in a given fashion. This was particularly true because the people in charge, namely, the camp commandants, had been trained in Eicke's school, in Dachau or in Oranienburg-Sachsenhausen.

For example, in July 1941 a total of 2,000 prisoners were transferred from Dachau to Buchenwald. They arrived in poor physical condition, many of them sick, infirm, or suffering from diseases. Buchenwald's chief physician, Dr. Waldemar Hoven, reported that the arrival of so many debilitated prisoners had not only totally precluded any possibilities of providing local medical treatment, but was endangering the rest of the prison population, then numbering about 6,500.

In conclusion it can be said concerning the state of health of the Dachau prisoners, that not a single prisoner is fully fit for labor duty and, that also in the near future only a very small percentage will be fully fit for labor duty. It may be in the interest of the entire camp, especially also for the members of the camp complement, to keep the Dachau prisoners for the time being isolated.⁵⁹

In a letter he appended to the report, the officer assigned to Buchenwald by I/5 noted that the transfer of these prisoners had given rise to disorder in the management of manpower in the camp. It had also created an evident risk to the health of the guards and the camp staff, as well as endangering the work capacity of the healthy prisoners.⁶⁰

This situation is indicative of that in all the camps at the time. Glücks, who was in charge of the camps, almost never interfered because he did not want to undermine the standing of the commandants. This veteran group of camp-SS was a focus of power that could not easily be disbanded. In Buchenwald, which was run by one of the toughest and most notorious commandants, Karl-Otto Koch, Bureau I/5 personnel had almost no say in policy-making in the camp. Koch totally ignored the issue of prisoners' labor. He and his wife, Ilsa, continued to administer the sadistic terror regime in Buchenwald without any outside interference.⁶¹

The Economic Needs and the Practice of Murder, 1941–1944

The organizational patterns of the labor system in the concentration camps were formulated along general lines in the second half of 1941 and early 1942, despite the difficulties raised by various elements in the system. But the

effort to introduce regulated and calculated administration of the labor force had immediate consequences because of the decision to rid the system of anyone unable to provide economic benefit. Such was the aim of *Sonderbehandlung 14f13*, the “special treatment” campaign that led to the murder of debilitated or infirm prisoners who were unable to continue working. This classification was solely administrative. According to the IKL’s records, files marked 14f related to the death of prisoners. For example, 14f7 was the notation for natural death, 14f8 was the administrative classification of prisoners who committed suicide, 14f14 indicated prisoners condemned to death, and 14f13 indicated those earmarked for liquidation as part of the euthanasia scheme that was introduced in 1939. The system was expanded in spring 1941 to encompass sick or physically disabled concentration camp inmates. As in other cases in which the Nazi’s classified groups of victims, the category was expanded for ideological reasons and included prisoners who were considered dangerous and Jewish prisoners who had been in the camps in 1941. Where the Jewish prisoners were concerned, the physicians who assessed physical ability often did not trouble to examine them. It was enough to note that the subject was a hostile element.⁶²

According to Michael Thad Allen, it is not entirely clear whether Wilhelm Burböck, who headed Bureau I/5, collaborated with this murder campaign or whether it was conducted entirely on Glücks and the IKL’s initiative. It is patently clear, however, that the camp commandants, exploiting the pressure exerted by Pohl and Burböck’s men for improvement of labor efficiency and rational use of manpower, murdered thousands of infirm prisoners who constituted a burden on the system. The camp administrators were all too willing to take part in this project inasmuch as it accorded with their basic outlook regarding the prisoners and the pointlessness of keeping them alive. These two elements in the SS—the camp personnel and the IKL on one hand and Pohl’s economic and administrative experts on the other—were supported by the medical staff in carrying out the killings.⁶³

One of the physicians who engaged in “medical diagnostics” was Friedrich Mennecke, who received his medical degree in 1934 and joined the Nazi Party and the SS in 1932. In the period during which he conducted the lethal selections of camp prisoners, he sent his wife a series of letters, written in the lighthearted style of a loving husband. These letters record his daily schedule, his work, and his spare-time activities. On November 27, 1941, for example, he wrote:

At 1:30 P.M. we began the examinations again, but Ribbentrop’s speech began and we stopped to listen to it. He said a lot of good things, did you hear the speech? After that we did examinations until around 4:00; I did 105 pats.,

Müller 78 pats., so that in the end our first installment of 183 forms was completed. The second portion followed, a total of 1,200 Jews, none of whom are even examined; it is enough to take the reason for arrest (often very comprehensive!) from the file and enter it on the form. Thus it is purely theoretical work, which will certainly occupy our time until Monday, maybe even longer. For second portion (Jews), we did the following: 17 for me, 15 for Müller. At exactly 5:00 P.M. we “threw in the towel” and went to dinner: a cold plate of salami (nine large slices), butter, bread, and a helping of coffee! Cost: .80 marks without coupons!! At 5:30 we were driven back to Weimar.⁶⁴

Prisoners were liquidated in a number of camps. At Groß-Rosen, the commandant reported to the IKL on the liquidation projects there in January 1942. A total of 293 prisoners of various nationalities were selected; about 70 of them were taken from the revier (sick bay), 104 from the camp blocks, and another 119 were Jews. In all, between 10,000 and 20,000 prisoners were murdered in these selections in the concentration camps before the criteria for selecting candidates for murder became stricter in mid-1943.⁶⁵

The IKL carefully studied reports from the camps about selective liquidation and were apparently not particularly satisfied with the efficiency of the examinations. Their inspection revealed that in some cases prisoners capable of being sent back to work were liquidated.⁶⁶ The selections may be described at least as negligent; in most cases assessing the prisoner’s ability to return to work was secondary to ideological considerations. In April 1943 an effort was made to impose some kind of order on this project. The decision was apparently taken by Himmler himself and transmitted through Glücks to the camp commandants. In his missive, Glücks wrote that only mentally disturbed prisoners or those with dangerous diseases or disabilities should be selected for special 14f13 treatment. As for the others, the sick, disabled, and feeble, their ability to continue working even if from their sickbeds should be checked. Only those who were not even of minimal value should be liquidated.⁶⁷

The impression is that the camp commandants were only too happy to exploit the extensive opportunities granted them by the genocide apparatus that began to operate with full force in late 1941. They wanted to exterminate as many as possible sick and defective prisoners, enemies of the state and Jews. The impetus for rational administration of the labor force provided the economic pretext, but in practice had almost no importance. The concentration camps, sites of terror, violence, and death from the outset, fitted in well in late 1941 with the Nazis’ genocide plan.

In early 1942 Pohl’s office was reorganized as the SS-Wirtschafts- und Verwaltungshauptamt (SS Central Office for Economics and Administration—

WVHA). The main reason for the bureaucratic reorganization was the new situation on the Soviet front and the assumption that the imminent victory would mean new tasks and challenges for the SS in the areas of economics, construction, and settlement in the East.⁶⁸ A significant step taken as part of these changes was Himmler's decision to transfer the IKL, which had been an independent authority since its establishment, to Pohl's jurisdiction.

The labor shortage became a crisis in the second half of 1942, when demands were becoming greater and more urgent. There had been 39.4 million German workers in May 1939, but the number dropped to 35.5 million in May 1942.⁶⁹ As a result, Hitler ordered the establishment of a special office for recruitment and assignment of manpower for industry within the framework of the Four Year Plan Office and appointed Fritz Sauckel, Gauleiter (party district leader) of Thuringia, as *Generalbevollmächtigter für den Arbeitseinsatz* (General Plenipotentiary for Labor Deployment). The mission of this authority was to transfer as much manpower as possible from the occupied countries to meet the needs of the German munitions industry. Between April and December 1942, 1.4 million laborers were recruited and transferred to Germany from the occupied territories in eastern and western Europe, almost all of whom were posted to industry. In the East, this mission was often carried out by violent methods. Young men of working age were seized and transported by rail to industrial centers in the Reich, which were in dire need of workers. In the Reichskommissariat (Reich civil administration) Ukraine, more than 350,000 laborers registered voluntarily or were recruited forcibly in 1942. Violent manhunts for recruitment of laborers took place in both urban and rural areas.⁷⁰

After the war Pohl claimed that he held several conversations with Himmler in late February and early March 1942 regarding the concentration camps. Himmler told him about Sauckel's appointment and said that the problem of manpower for the wider war effort had become a central issue that the SS would have to tackle. Himmler, unwilling to have the SS miss this opportunity, said that the camp inmates were a manpower resource that was totally under his control. He told Pohl that his office had the experience and ability to transform the camps into a source of labor for industry; hence he needed to take responsibility for supervising the camps. Pohl claimed that he had tried to persuade Himmler that the RSHA should be the body in charge of the prisoners, but Himmler insisted that it was no longer a political or security problem but an economic issue. Once the war had been won, the question would be reexamined, and perhaps then it would be possible to place the camps under the RSHA's jurisdiction.⁷¹

Because the system that Pohl took over functioned differently, however, it was impossible to obtain large numbers of prisoners by a simple stroke of the pen. Himmler hoped to be able to transfer to the camps some of the

hundreds of thousands of Soviet POWs who had fallen into German hands in the first months of the war in the Soviet Union, but they did not arrive in the anticipated numbers. The army objected to the transfer of more than 350,000 POWs to concentration camps. By early 1942 it had become clear that two-thirds of them had perished in the first months of the war in mass liquidations in the POW camps where they were starved to death or in the course of lengthy death marches to their places of detention.⁷² Of more than 3.5 million Soviet POWs taken by the Germans at the beginning of the war, only some 1.2 million were alive in early February 1942.⁷³ In his predicament, Himmler turned to the most available source of slave labor: the Jews. On January 26, 1942, six days after the Wannsee Conference that dealt with the steps to be taken for the liquidation of all Europe's Jews, he transmitted the following order to Glücks:

As no more Russian prisoners of war are expected in the near future, I shall send to the camps a large number of Jews and Jewesses who will be sent out of Germany. Make the necessary arrangements for reception of 100,000 male Jews and up to 50,000 Jewesses into the concentration camps during the next 4 weeks. The concentration camps will have to deal with major economic problems and tasks in the next weeks. SS-Gruppenführer Pohl will inform you of particulars.⁷⁴

From the end of 1941, the killings in the concentration camps converged with the Nazis' Final Solution of the Jewish question. The decision, approved by the Führer, to render the Reich "free of Jews," was assimilated by Himmler into his plan for rapid expansion of the available manpower pool in the concentration camps. Heydrich and his SD staff believed that the Jews deported from Germany should suffer a different fate; they should be transported eastward, there to share the fate of the Jews of the occupied countries, namely, immediate liquidation.⁷⁵ But in January 1942, Himmler outlined the parameters for managing the Final Solution until the end of the war: the murder of Jews was a central goal, but, when necessary, urgent and changing economic constraints were to be taken into consideration. The concentration camps, which had served as sites for the selective murder of sick, injured, and disabled prisoners since 1941, were now to be integrated into the Nazi genocide plan and the task of exterminating the Jews. However, the timing would be determined in light of a wide range of calculations.

Pohl, who took over responsibility for the camps in spring 1942, sent Himmler a report on the situation in the camps at that time. After surveying the increase in the number of camp inmates in the old Reich and Austria, he clearly described the tasks that faced the camps.

The war has brought a marked change in the structure of the concentration camps and has changed their duties with regard to the employment of the prisoners. The custody of prisoners for the sole reason of security, education, or prevention is no longer the main consideration. The economic situation has now become the most important factor. The mobilization of all prisoners' labor [forces], for purpose of the war now (increased production of armament), and for purposes of construction in the forthcoming peace, comes to the foreground more and more.⁷⁶

It is questionable whether the concentration camp system for which Pohl was now responsible was equipped to handle a large slave labor resource, administered according to efficient economic criteria. The administrative manpower in the camps was limited, and the existing infrastructure was not able to immediately absorb hundreds of thousands of prisoners. In early 1942, 5,884 SS personnel were employed in the camps together with 511 outside workers, namely, German nationals who were employed in clerical and office work. In several camps there was a noticeable shortage of manpower, which the commandants often complained about. For example, in Ravensbrück, the camp for women, there were only 92 SS staff and 235 outside workers. In Dachau, Buchenwald, and Sachsenhausen, the SS manpower quota was 256, and there was almost no other staff. In the new camps in Poland, the SS manpower quota was larger: in Lublin (Majdanek) there were 423 SS men and 2 outside workers, and Auschwitz had some 2,000 guards and SS troops, with an auxiliary staff of 116.⁷⁷ In July 1942 this staff administered 98,000 inmates and in August 115,000.⁷⁸

This unplanned increase in the number of prisoners, which was implemented hurriedly and inefficiently, had an immediate impact on living conditions in the camps and caused a steep rise in the mortality rate. In July 1942, 8.5 percent of the prisoners (8,329) died, in August the number rose to 12,217 (10.6 percent), and in September it dropped to 11,206 (10.2 percent). By the end of 1943 the number of camp inmates had declined, and in December of that year they numbered 88,000 as against 115,000 just 18 months previously. Pohl cited several reasons for this drop: disruptions in the food supply, the camp commandants' decision to ignore the order to permit prisoners to keep the warm garments they had brought with them to the camp, and various administrative hitches. Himmler expressed his appreciation for Pohl's efforts, in his first year of office, to convert the camps into a smoothly functioning framework and to enhance efficiency. However, Himmler too appeared to consider that an annual prisoner death rate of 10 percent was unalterable, and perhaps also that no change was required.⁷⁹

Another problem related to the camp commandants. Concurrently with the report he sent Himmler in April 1942, Pohl dispatched explicit instructions to the camp commandants advising them that they bore exclusive responsibility for existing and future SS industrial concerns. He tried to convert the senior camp administrators from commanders of prison installations based on terror and punishment into managers capable of taking responsibility for a system employing thousands of productive forced laborers. Pohl freed them of responsibility for the labor schedule and emphasized that there was no specified limit to the number of working hours, leaving the matter to their discretion. However, such changes required a much more substantial reorganization of the entire camp system.⁸⁰

In summer 1942 Pohl introduced sweeping changes in the senior command of the concentration camps. Several of the men he valued were left in place: Fritz Ziereis at Mauthausen, Herman Pister at Buchenwald, and Rudolf Höß at Auschwitz. At the same time, he made a series of appointments that stabilized the camp commands until the end of the war. Several commandants were transferred to other camps: Martin-Gottfried Weiß from Neuengamme to Dachau, Egon Zill from Natzweiler-Struthof to Flossenbürg, Max Pauly from Stutthof to Neuengamme, and Max Koegel from Ravensbrück to Majdanek. There were several new appointments: Fritz Suhren was sent to command Ravensbrück, Josef Kramer was appointed commandant of Natzweiler-Struthof, Wilhelm Gideon became commandant of Groß-Rosen but was replaced in fall 1943 by Johannes Hassebroek, Paul Werner Hoppe was given command of Stutthof, and Anton Kaindl was assigned to command Sachsenhausen. All the new commandants were senior SS men who had once served in the camp system. Pohl understood that only men who had been trained within this unique system were capable of doing the job, but he made sure that the new commandants were qualified to follow the new direction he planned for the system. Most were relatively young men with an administrative-economic orientation that accorded with his own outlook. For the first time since the concentration camp system was established, Eicke's henchmen were no longer the decisive factor in its administration.⁸¹

In fall 1942, when a military resolution was imminent at Stalingrad on the eastern front, understandings were reached with Albert Speer's ministry regarding absorbing prisoners into military production frameworks. Pohl, Speer, and senior members of the WVHA and the Ministry of Armaments met on September 15 and agreed that the manpower reserves in the concentration camps should be made available exclusively to the armaments industry. In a report Pohl sent Himmler on this meeting, he argued that in order to achieve this aim:

We (the SS. [D.B].) must waive one of our basic demands. We can no longer insist that all production be confined within the borders of our concentration camp. As long as we were dealing with crumbs—as you yourself, Reichsführer, correctly defined the scope of our work so far—we could make this demand. If we want to take control of a closed armaments concern with 10,000 or 15,000 prisoners in the near future, it is not possible to locate this labor “intra muro.” As Reichsminister Speer so rightly said, this labor must be located in an open area. Then we need to erect an electric fence around the place; then we can supply the necessary number of prisoners and the project can function as the workplace of the SS armaments industry. . . . Reichsminister Speer anticipated the immediate recruitment of 50,000 Jews who are fit for work there.⁸²

This agreement was of vital importance: it laid the foundations for the transfer in the last two years of the war of tens of thousands of camp prisoners to the armaments industry and to private industrial concerns producing for that industry. It also created the basis for the development of a vast network of subcamps, constructed over a wide radius, sometimes hundreds of miles from the main camp, adjacent to the sites where the prisoners slaved. This was a dramatic change: instead of a closed central camp that isolated criminals and dangerous elements from society, it created a wide-ranging presence of groups of prisoners, sometimes in isolated and insufficiently protected areas, in the midst of civilian populations, in settlements or factories, working alongside ordinary civilians. Speer dealt with this issue at one of his meetings with Hitler at the end of September 1942 and obtained his approval of the plan.⁸³

The vast labor source in the concentration camps and the accompanying subcamp system was built up mainly in the last two years of the war. The fate of hundreds of thousands of concentration camp inmates in the final stages of the war and their chance of living to see the day of liberation became a function of the ability to transfer them rapidly to places where their labor could continue to be exploited. This upheaval transformed thousands of antisocial, political, criminal, and other prisoners into an economic resource of vital importance for the war effort.

Two WVHA officers played a crucial role in this upheaval. The first was Dr. Hans Kammler, one of the most prominent of the administrators recruited by Pohl. He was a typical well-educated, efficient, and intelligent German technocrat, who placed his talents and abilities at the disposal of the Nazi ideology. Born in 1901 to a military family, he was educated at the best schools and graduated as an engineer. In 1934 he published a book through the Berlin Technical University in which he presented his views on the best

way to combine modern technology, efficient bureaucracy, and rationality based on the precise collation of data for decision makers, industrial planning, and the supremacy of the Aryan race.

In June 1941 Kammler joined Pohl's office, taking a central position in the organization's economic-administrative system. In February 1942 he was placed in charge of the construction projects in Pohl's office as commander of *Amtsgruppe* (departmental group) C. He took a wide-ranging view of his task and in no way confined himself to purely economic matters. In August 1942 he joined Himmler on a tour of Poland and the Ukraine, which included the main extermination sites where the Final Solution was proceeding at full force. On August 8, 1942, he visited the Bełżec death camp together with Odilo Globocnik, commander of the SS and the police in the Lublin district. Kammler's staff administered the intensive construction at Auschwitz in 1942 and the extermination system in the camp. His activities in the concentration camp network encompassed two areas that were to become indivisibly connected, namely, labor and extermination. The dialectical connection between them stemmed largely from his approach. This combination of functions reached its fullest application in 1943 when Kammler was placed in charge of the armaments and secret weapon system in the Harz Mountains in central Germany and the establishment of the Mittelbau-Dora camp network.⁸⁴

Gerhard Maurer was the second individual who had a major impact on the change in exploitation of prisoner labor. He became part of the concentration camp supervision system in 1942 following the organizational changes in the WVHA. He headed Office D-II and was responsible for placement and movement of prisoners (*Arbeitseinsatz der Häftlinge*) in the important labor sites.

Maurer was only 34 years old when placed at the head of D-II. Like Pohl, he had an advanced degree in administration and economics; he had joined the Nazi Party in 1930 and the SS a year later. In 1933 he left a lucrative position in order to work for a Nazi publishing house. After joining the camp supervision network, Maurer became the most influential individual in the office, and almost no fundamental decision was taken there that did not bear his personal stamp. He introduced new methods of administration and supervision of the prison manpower and management of camp labor. Maurer demanded accurate information on the number of prisoners and the active labor sites and initiated new agreements with various elements in the economy and industry regarding the exploitation of prisoners in production systems. The most important change he instituted was the introduction of medical teams into the camps to determine whether prisoners were fit for work. The medical teams were intended to serve as a counterbalance to the

camp command's decision affecting the fate of prisoners. The criteria were to be entirely professional rather than arbitrary.⁸⁵

The transfer of concentration camp prisoners to the armaments industry and private industrial concerns was initiated in December 1942 in the following way. Maurer received all the data transmitted by the camp commandants on the number of prisoners capable of productive labor. Requests for manpower from various firms were submitted to D-II or directly to the camp command. It was the camp commandant's responsibility to examine whether the applicant was capable of supplying the prisoners' basic needs: housing, food, clothing, and medical treatment. He reported to Maurer, who personally examined the subject and then checked with Speer's office as to how essential the specific concern's products were for the war economy. Once a week Pohl, Maurer, and Glücks met to discuss new applications. Pohl was the supreme authority who approved the transfer of prisoners to the applicant. Glücks and Maurer then implemented the decision.⁸⁶

In the second half of 1944 the method of assigning prisoners to armaments factories changed, and Speer's office again began to play a more central role in the process. Speer concentrated all the requests for manpower and passed them on to Maurer's office. Then the request was checked with the manpower administration in specific camps, and their ability to supply the workers was examined. These changes were made in order to simplify and accelerate the process. Speer's decision now carried greater weight.⁸⁷

The transfer of prisoners from camp to camp, and their transportation by freight car under inhuman conditions over hundreds, even thousands, of miles in answer to labor needs became almost an everyday event from the end of 1942. However, despite all the efforts of the decision makers and authors of the new policy, Himmler, Pohl, and Speer, even they could not instantly convert the camp system into a new and different *modus operandi*. For example, at the end of October 1942, 499 prisoners were dispatched from Dachau and 186 from Ravensbrück to Auschwitz to meet the manpower requirements of the I. G. Farben Works, located in Buna-Monowitz. Their condition was reported by Department IIIa in the camp, which was responsible for assigning prisoners to work assignments:

The 499 prisoners transferred from Dachau are in very bad physical condition and none of them is suitable for work in the Buna plant. Barely a third of them can be employed in other work and these only after two-week recovery time. 50 of the arrivals could be employed in their profession; 162 have no profession, and 267 of the transferees are farm workers. 186 prisoners transferred from Ravensbrück were in a better physical condition than those from Dachau;

128 of them are employed in their professions and only 58 of them have no profession.⁸⁸

The death rate among prisoners continued to be high at the end of 1942, and it seemed that if it was not checked, there would be no prospect of transforming these prison and murder installations into workplaces capable of attracting private firms and major industries. As a result, in 1942 the camp industries accounted for a negligible proportion of the armaments industry: to be precise, 0.0002 percent.⁸⁹ Glücks, most probably on instructions from Pohl, issued a directive on December 28, 1942, to all camp physicians and commandants. He wrote that, according to the data in his possession (he did not note what period they covered but it was apparently up to 1942), out of 136,000 prisoners in the camps, 70,000 had perished. With such a high mortality rate, it would be impossible to select the required number of prisoners, as Himmler had instructed. The camp physicians were charged with central responsibility for significantly reducing the death rate. Glücks emphasized that, in order to carry out his job properly, a camp physician should not be overly inflexible but should be concerned with preserving manpower and raising productivity in the camp. Physicians were now required, more so than in the past, to attend to the nutrition and working conditions of the prisoners and to do whatever possible to reduce the mortality rate.⁹⁰

The result of the effort invested, in particular by Maurer and his staff, was a statistical drop in prisoner mortality in the concentration camps; the monthly rate dropped from 8 to 10 percent in 1942 to 2 to 3 percent at the end of 1943. These figures are deceptive, however, due to the constant rise in the number of new prisoners in the camps, the absolute number of prisoners who perished did not decline drastically.⁹¹ From early 1943 the number of inmates rose steeply. In May of that year there were 203,000, in August 224,000, and by August 1944 the number had ballooned to 524,286. On January 1, 1945, there were 706,650 concentration camp inmates, and the last available figures, relating to January 15, 1945, refer to 714,211 prisoners.⁹²

Between October and December 1942 there were between 83,000 and 88,000 prisoners, and the average monthly mortality rate was 8,500. In February–March 1943 close to 12,000 of the 150,000 prisoners perished monthly. Only in summer 1943, when the number of prisoners had reached 200,000, did a significant decline occur in the mortality rate, but even then more than 5,500 were dying each month. This “optimistic” picture altered drastically in the last year of the war, when the camps became sites of slow death and of deliberate murder of tens of thousands of prisoners.⁹³

This increase in the number of prisoners was accompanied by the sprouting of hundreds of subcamps. In late 1942 there were only a handful of such camps: 2 at Neuengamme, 7 at Mauthausen, 6 at Buchenwald, and 9 at Auschwitz. Toward the end of 1943 there were 9 at Neuengamme, 17 at Mauthausen, 20 at Buchenwald, and 15 at Auschwitz. By June 1944 Neuengamme had 51 subcamps, Mauthausen 24, Buchenwald 20, and Auschwitz 30. The number of subcamps continued to increase even in the last few months of the war, and in early 1945 some of the camps operated up to 100 subcamps, covering large areas where thousands of prisoners were housed and worked. In some cases subcamps spawned subcamps of their own. In June 1944 the concentration camp system included 341 subcamps, and according to several estimates, in the last months of the war the figure rose to 900–1,200 throughout the concentration camp system.⁹⁴

These camps were often located within a radius of dozens and even hundreds of miles from the main camp. They were established in rural areas and sometimes in the heart of towns and close to factories; they were a vast source of income for the WVHA. Private industry paid the SS 3 to 4 marks daily for each prisoner, and in 1944, as the demand rose and the supply dwindled, payment rose to 4 to 6 marks daily. The payment for women prisoners was 3 to 4 marks daily. Although the concentration camps were able to offer private industry no more than 10 percent of the hundreds of thousands of inmates of the camps in 1942–1944, they still provided a sizeable income.⁹⁵

From late 1943 there was an urgent need for manpower for the armaments industry, especially for military aviation production. From the summer of that year airfields, energy production centers, and aviation industry factories were the prime target of Allied bombers. Speer's Ministry of Armaments sought various ways to locate this vital production network as far as possible outside the range of British and American aircraft.⁹⁶ In light of the worsening military situation in late 1943 and the evident superiority of the Royal Air Force (RAF) and the U.S. Air Force over the Luftwaffe, the issue of aircraft and armaments production became crucial. Hitler and senior figures in the German military command believed that the key to halting the decline and changing the course of the war lay in the development of new fighter planes and sophisticated rocket weapons.⁹⁷ By 1944 the military aircraft industry would become the main employer of concentration camp prisoners.

In late 1941 the Heinkel-Werke Aviation Works began to exploit Sachsenhausen inmates. By early 1944 some 90,000 prisoners had become part of the construction and production network of the aviation industry, and the intention was to add another 100,000. The great majority of prisoners were

not engaged in producing weapons. They worked for the SS, DESt, or Organization Todt (a large economic and military engineering concern that supported the Nazi regime), and in special construction detachments for which Hans Kammler was responsible, and on construction of the physical infrastructure of the giant production enterprises that manufactured aircraft, flying bombs, rockets, and other equipment. Such enterprises were set up in almost all the concentration camps and their subcamps: Auschwitz, Groß-Rosen, Buchenwald, Dachau, Flossenbürg, Mauthausen, Neuengamme, Natzweiler-Struthof, Sachsenhausen, and the camps that operated in the Reichskommissariat Ostland.⁹⁸ Pohl estimated after the war that, in early 1945, approximately 230,000 of the 799,000 concentration camp prisoners were connected in one way or another with the armaments industry. Some 170,000 of them were “construction prisoners” (*Bauhäftlinge*); namely, they were employed in strenuous infrastructure and construction work and were under the responsibility of Kammler’s office.⁹⁹ The heart of this giant project, which included tens of thousands of slave laborers engaged in digging tunnels and building subterranean factories for production of aircraft and sophisticated weapons, was Mittelbau-Dora.

Extermination through Labor

When the issue of *Vernichtung durch Arbeit* (extermination through labor) during World War II is examined, it may sometimes seem that the SS personnel in Pohl’s office who were responsible for the labor and economic system worked according to an orderly and coherent plan. However, in the last year of the war, the SS was faced with a serious policy question: the ratio between economic and ideological considerations and the dialogue between them. The conditions that prevailed at the gigantic and complex economic project constructed at Mittelbau-Dora, and the many victims it claimed, indicate that these two calculations were interwoven and that it was impossible to decide which was the more crucial.¹⁰⁰

The Mittelbau-Dora network was closely involved in the German effort to promote the development of rocket weaponry, whose planning had begun in 1939. The armaments and aircraft production authorities began to treat the matter seriously only after the Stalingrad catastrophe. In August 1943 Hitler decided that the rocket project should be conducted underground. A special committee, which included Speer’s representatives and Kammler’s engineers, decided on the Harz Mountains in central Germany as the appropriate production site for the new weapons. Himmler took full responsibility for creating the required infrastructure. The individual who implemented the decision and was behind the recruitment and management

of tens of thousands of slave laborers who excavated subterranean tunnels at the site was Hans Kammler.¹⁰¹

On August 28, 1943, the first group of 107 prisoners arrived from Buchenwald to prepare the infrastructure for the great building project. By the end of September 1943, there were more than 3,000 prisoners at Mittelbau-Dora, which was then a subcamp of Buchenwald. By the end of the year, the number had risen to more than 10,000. When it became an independent concentration camp in November 1944, there were more than 14,000 prisoners in the main camp and more than 19,000 in a series of subcamps and external kommandos.¹⁰² According to the records of the camp physicians, some 3,000 prisoners perished at Mittelbau-Dora up to March 1944. Another 3,000, who were no longer fit for work, were evacuated from the camp on special transports to Majdanek (i.e., sent to their deaths). Hence, between early September 1943 and March 1944, the first six months of Mittelbau-Dora's existence, 6,000 of the 17,000 prisoners who arrived in the camp perished. A 30 percent mortality rate was unheard of at the time in any concentration camp.¹⁰³

The grim working conditions—the damp, the dust, and soot in the subterranean tunnels—all these played havoc with the health of the prisoners and were the main cause of death.¹⁰⁴ In the absence of basic safety conditions, work accidents were common. “By accident I was injured in the head by the fall of a rock from the roof of the tunnel while I was working . . . several days before I had been hurt when my right foot was crushed between two wagons,” wrote one of the French prisoners.¹⁰⁵ The long working day, consisting of about 12 hours of hard labor, the meager rations, and the inadequate clothing also contributed to the high rate of disease and death.¹⁰⁶ The cold weather, which began in early fall, was a particularly harsh adversary. One of the prisoners described the conditions in September 1944:

We reached Dora and it was bitterly cold. There, underground, it was cold and there was a draught . . . there were piles of bodies. We weren't moved when we saw the dead, poor things. What did people do? If they saw a better shirt than they had, they stripped it off and took it for themselves. It's no disgrace to say it, it happened.¹⁰⁷

What occurred in Mittelbau-Dora, as in other concentration camps in the last year of the war, cannot be explained solely through the prism of the policy of extermination through labor. It was not a case of adopting new murder methods to expedite the familiar genocide process, which had been under way since 1941. This was a new, different process. In contrast to the past, this new type of extermination was calculated and planned in terms of

economics, cost, production, and output; extermination and exploitation (*Vernichtungs und Ausbeutungsprozess*, as Jens-Christian Wagner denotes them)¹⁰⁸ were tightly interlinked and inseparable. The extermination of prisoners was not the main objective of the concentration camps, several of which, like Mittelbau-Dora, Auschwitz, or Mauthausen, became giant centers of slave labor. Fitness for work was the decisive criterion, which determined the sharp borderline between life and death; prisoners who collapsed were often killed in the workplace. According to this selective extermination method, the victims were not chosen according to political or racial criteria, as were most of the victims of Nazi genocide, but instead on the basis of their physical condition.¹⁰⁹ Hans Kammler summed up this trend succinctly in an order to his men when the Mittelbau-Dora production enterprise was set up in 1944: “*Kümmern Sie sich nicht um die menschlichen Opfer. Die Arbeiten müssen vorankommen, und das in möglichst kurzer Zeit.*” (Do not be considerate of the human victims. The work must be completed in the shortest possible time.)¹¹⁰

This was a new stage in the Nazi genocide, and its main perpetrators came from an economic and administrative background. It combined total exploitation of the prisoners’ work capacity with meticulous liquidation of those who were no longer fit for labor. It began with the changes in the concentration camp system in the first half of 1942 and reached maturity in late 1943 with the transition to a state of total warfare. The SS’s unceasing efforts to transfer more and more prisoners to the concentration camps in order to proceed apace with building and industrialization brought into the camps vast numbers of prisoners who were perceived from the outset as undeserving of long-term survival: Jews, Poles, Russians, Ukrainians, French resistance fighters, and Yugoslav and Italian communists. They made up the bulk of the prisoners who were incarcerated in concentration camps in the last 18 months of the war. The process that transformed the camps into a giant national pool of slave laborers classified as enemies of the race, political foes, and enemies of society was reflected, for example, in the agreement between Himmler and the Ministry of Justice for the general transfer of certain categories of prisoners from the judicial system to the concentration camps.

In September 1942 the Nazi minister of justice, Otto Thierack, met with Himmler, and the two agreed on the transfer to the SS of Jewish, Gypsy, Russian, and Ukrainian prisoners from state punitive installations where they were serving sentences meted out by courts of law. These prisoners were to be transferred en masse without classification of any kind. The same rule was applied to Poles who had been sentenced to more than three years’ imprisonment. Thierack was convinced that, at a time when the ex-

termination of enemies of the Reich was proceeding at full speed and the Final Solution of the Jewish problem was underway throughout the territories occupied by Nazi Germany, only those capable of returning to society and being rehabilitated as worthwhile citizens should be left in state prisons. Inveterate criminals, Jews, Slavs, and Gypsies were not included in this category, and hence the camp system should deal with them. As a result of the understanding between Himmler and Thierack, the state handed over to the SS more than 17,000 prisoners between November 1942 and summer 1943.¹¹¹

This was only one group out of the tens of thousands of prisoners—slave laborers who flooded into the camps in the last two years of their existence. The rapid increase in the inmate population led to amendments of the procedures for registration and follow-up of the arrivals. In spring 1944 Glücks informed his camp commandants that there was no longer any need to list by name prisoners from the eastern territories who were deported to the camps. It was enough to count and register them on arrival. This being so, there was also no need to report the number of deaths or any other data concerning them before they became mere numbers in an army of slaves.¹¹² This dehumanization paved the way for the effort to ease the administrative nightmare posed to the system by the population explosion. The demands of the armaments industry led to tactical retreat even from the effort to realize the vision of the racial empire. The most striking evidence of this retreat was the decision to transfer tens of thousands of Jewish prisoners in summer 1944 from Auschwitz to hundreds of subcamps established in that period throughout the Reich.

Before summer 1944 there had been relatively few Jewish prisoners in the old established concentration camps in the old Reich or Austria. Nor were the Jews one of the larger national groups in the camps established in occupied Poland after the outbreak of war. They were a larger presence in the labor camps, established by the army, administrative authorities of the Generalgouvernement, and private concerns in Poland and the Baltic states. In certain periods they constituted the majority of prisoners there.¹¹³

In mid-May 1944, after obtaining Hitler's consent, Himmler sent a letter to Pohl with instructions to arrange for the transfer of Jewish men from Hungary to the labor camps of the armaments industry and Organization Todt concerns. According to this letter, Hitler had approved the transfer of 200,000 Hungarian Jews to the Reich for these purposes. Himmler also spoke openly of this step in a speech to SS officers on June 21, 1944. He emphasized the extent to which this decision had called for compromise on his part, and he added that in no way did the dispatch of 200,000 Jewish males to concentration camps mean that their wives and children were to be

left alive, since these children, when they became adults, would endanger the lives of the German population. He went on to stress that under no circumstances would situations arise whereby these Jews came into contact with citizens of the Reich.¹¹⁴ From the second half of May 1944, trains left Auschwitz carrying thousands of Jews from Hungary to concentration camps in Germany. On May 23, 1,000 Jews were conveyed to Buchenwald, followed by another 2,000 on June 5. On June 6, 2,000 Jews were sent to Mauthausen, and on June 11 another 2,000 followed. On June 11, 1,000 Jews were transported to Buchenwald, and on June 17, 1,500 were sent to Mauthausen. On July 1, 2,000 Jewish women were sent to Buchenwald, and on July 14 another 2,000 were sent to Stutthof. On July 15, 2,500 Jewish men were dispatched to Buchenwald, and on June 30, 530 women were sent there.¹¹⁵ The transfer of Hungarian Jews to labor camps in the Reich continued all summer. According to Götz Aly and Christian Gerlach, about one quarter of the 430,000 Hungarian Jews who were dispatched to Auschwitz in spring–summer 1944 were transferred to camps in Germany or Poland.¹¹⁶

By the summer of 1944 the Jews had become the main national group among the concentration camp inmates. There were 8,100 Jewish prisoners in Auschwitz I out of 14,300 inmates in mid-July of that year. Between mid-May and the end of July some 430,000 Jews from Hungary were transported to Birkenau, as well as 3,000 from France and 1,500 from Italy. Also sent were thousands from the Terezin ghetto, from the Westerbork transition camp, from worksites at Sosnowiec, and more than 2,000 from Corfu. By mid-August 60,000 Jews from the liquidated Łódź ghetto were among the arrivals and another 430 French Jews.¹¹⁷ Not all the arrivals in these transports underwent selection and were chosen for labor. If the estimate of the number of Hungarian deportees is taken as representative, however, it appears that about one quarter of the Jews brought to Auschwitz in spring–summer 1944 were fortunate enough to be selected for labor in the camp and were sent to one of the subcamps or transferred to other concentration camps.

Between April and October 1944, 47,000 Jewish prisoners arrived at Stutthof: 22,268 of them had been transferred from Auschwitz, 8,982 from camps in Kovno and 15,851 from camps evacuated in the Riga area. At Groß-Rosen and its numerous subcamps, there were some 60,000 Jewish prisoners in the second half of 1944, who accounted for about one half of the total prisoner population. Of this total, 26,000 were women from Hungary and Poland.¹¹⁸ There were 9,837 Jewish prisoners at Buchenwald in November 1944, about 16 percent of the total, and by the end of December their number had risen to 15,477, about one quarter of the total. There was a similar number of Russian prisoners; the French accounted for 16.5 percent

of the prison population and the Poles 7.5 percent.¹¹⁹ Maurer, who was in charge of assigning prisoners to labor sites, issued a special instruction regarding Jewish prisoners. It was permissible to move them freely between the Buchenwald subcamps in accordance with labor requirements but totally prohibited to transfer them to other concentration camps.¹²⁰ Thus, in late 1944, the Jews became the main national group even in the subcamp network of a veteran concentration camp in the heart of the Reich. Oswald Pohl testified after the war that, at their numerous meetings, Himmler never ordered him to adopt a harsh or special policy toward Jewish prisoners in the camps: “With me he spoke only of prisoners, since he knew precisely which prisoners I was dealing with.”¹²¹ This knowledge was undoubtedly shared by the entire system. When Jews or other prisoners were selected for labor, it was because they were capable of working, regardless of their nationality. However, in his speech about the 200,000 Hungarian Jews, Himmler made it abundantly clear that extermination and labor were not conflicting aims. Exploitation of the labor of Jews and other camp prisoners was undertaken for the sake of the war effort, but victory could not be complete without the extermination of the Jews, in particular the children and women who were of limited economic value but could prove highly dangerous in the future.

From the moment the prisoners reached the camps and labor sites in the last years of the war, their lives proceeded along a time axis between their physical fitness at one extreme and their liquidation at the other. They could move in only one direction, and reaching the end of the line was only a question of time. The concentration and labor camps in the last stage of the war had become installations for slow extermination; selections were not carried out within minutes of arrival, as had been the case on the Auschwitz ramp, but over days and weeks as a result of hard labor. Those who were incapable of enduring the effort and fell sick, collapsed, or were injured and disabled due to the working conditions were murdered on the spot or evacuated from the camp to other camps that absorbed these walking dead. Majdanek, at the end of 1943, was a major destination for prisoners who had undergone this selection and whose lives were now considered worthless. Dozens of transports brought tens of thousand of prisoners there from Dachau, Buchenwald, Flossenbürg, Neuengamme, Auschwitz, Mauthausen, Sachsenhausen, and Ravensbrück. At least 30 percent of the prisoners from many of these transports perished at Majdanek after several weeks.¹²² In early 1944 Bergen-Belsen also began to serve the needs of this project.¹²³

This reality can only be explained by the fact that in the last year of the war the camps became vast labor and extermination installations that housed prisoners of all races and political affiliations who had been classified as

dangerous enemies of the Aryan race. These prisoners were merged together into a faceless collective entity, devoid of identity apart from the instrumental identity that could be exploited until it ceased to be of use to the war effort. It was these masses of prisoners who set out on the evacuations and death marches when the great retreat began in winter 1944–1945. They were to be the last victims of Nazi genocide.