The ‘final solution’

Read Source 28. It shows how far Nazi anti-Semitism had gone. The right of the Jews to exist at all under Nazi rule had become a ‘question’, needing a ‘solution’. The final solution proposed by Göring, with Hitler’s full support, and carried out by Heydrich and Himmler, was to kill everyone.

It is impossible to comprehend what this scale of organised death means. Sources 29, 30, 32 and 35 describe different aspects of the ‘final solution’, as seen by four individual victims.

Finding a way of killing so many people was not easy. At first they were shot. Special squads, Einsatzgruppen, ordered Jews to dig a trench. They were then shot and fell into the trench which became a mass grave (see Source 29). At Babi Yar, in the Ukraine, 30,000 Jews were killed and buried in this way.

Shooting proved to be an inefficient way of killing so many people however. The Nazis therefore employed 20th century technology to find a way of killing as many people as possible at one time. The gas chambers, built at Auschwitz by the end of 1941, were the result. They could kill 2,000 people at once. Other death camps were built at Chełmno, Belzec, Maidanek, Sobibor and Treblinka. Auschwitz was the biggest because its position on the railway network meant that Jews could be brought there by train from all over Europe (see Sources 30 and 31).

SOURCE 28
Göring’s order to Himmler and Heydrich of 31 July 1941.

‘I hereby charge you with making all necessary preparations... for bringing about a final solution of the Jewish question within the German sphere of influence in Europe.’

SOURCE 29
Dina Pronicheva, who survived the mass shootings of the Einsatzgruppen, describes her experiences.

‘All around and beneath her she could hear strange sounds, groaning, choking and sobbing. Many of the people were not dead yet. Then she heard people walking near her, actually on the bodies. They were Germans who had climbed down and were taking things from the dead and occasionally firing at those which showed signs of life.’

SOURCE 30
A Polish Jew named David describes the train journey to Treblinka camp.

‘We are lined up beside a railway cattle wagon. Once we are inside there is no room to sit... There is no roof. Suddenly the door is jammed shut and sealed. A bucket is tossed in as a container for human waste. Terrible cries pierce the air. An old lady near me has just died. A little boy is screaming for his mother.’

SOURCE 31
Jews being taken by train to a concentration camp.
The Nazis were proud of this efficient death machine. Lists of Jews from all over Europe were drawn up. They were taken from their homes and put on trains. Three hundred and twenty thousand Jews died on the trains.

On arrival at the camp, families were separated (see Source 32). Most women, all children and the old and sick — about 80 per cent of each train load — went straight to the gas chambers. They were told it was a communal shower, as Source 33 tells us. The relatives of these people, working in separate parts of the camp, often did not find out until months later that members of their families had been put to death.

Special prisoners — Sonderkommando — opened up the doors of the gas chambers. Gold teeth and rings were taken from the bodies (see Source 34) as well as hair to fill mattresses. They then burnt the bodies in special ovens.

Those who had been selected to work were sent to special factories at the camps. Workers were treated as non-humans, and usually died after a few months. Source 35 describes one man's attempt to cling to his humanity. In some camps painful, often fatal, medical experiments were carried out.

The process continued to the end of the war. In fact, transporting victims to the camps actually hindered the war effort by using locomotives, men and fuel. By 1945, six million Jews as well as about five million others including Slavs, gypsies and homosexuals had been killed.

An SS Officer came to meet us, a truncheon in his hand. He gave the order: "Men to the left, women to the right"... Eight short, simple words. Yet that was the moment when I parted from my mother. I glimpsed my mother and my sister moving away to the right. My mother was stroking my sister's fair hair as though to protect her, while I walked on with my father and the other men and did not know that in that place at that moment I was parting from my mother and sister for ever.

SOURCE 32
A Jewish boy, Elie, aged 15, describes the 'selection' on the platform at Auschwitz.

SOURCE 35
Primo Levi, an Italian Jew, who was in Auschwitz, describes how their treatment almost destroyed their humanity.

'Something belongs to us any more. They have taken away our clothes, our shoes, even our hair... They took away our name. If we want to keep it we will have to find the strength to do so, so that behind the name something of us still remains.'
KIDS' BRAINS IN NAZI RESEARCH: These jars hold the brains of hundreds of physically or mentally handicapped children killed under a Nazi euthanasia programme in Vienna. The remains of about 400 children used in research for decades were to have been buried in a public ceremony yesterday.
Meantime, the possessions, clothes and hair of the victims were sorted, marked, packed for sending back to Germany in the same train that had brought them. To destroy the evidence, the huge amount of ashes produced daily was loaded onto trucks and spread in the marshes adjoining the camp or used as fertilizer.