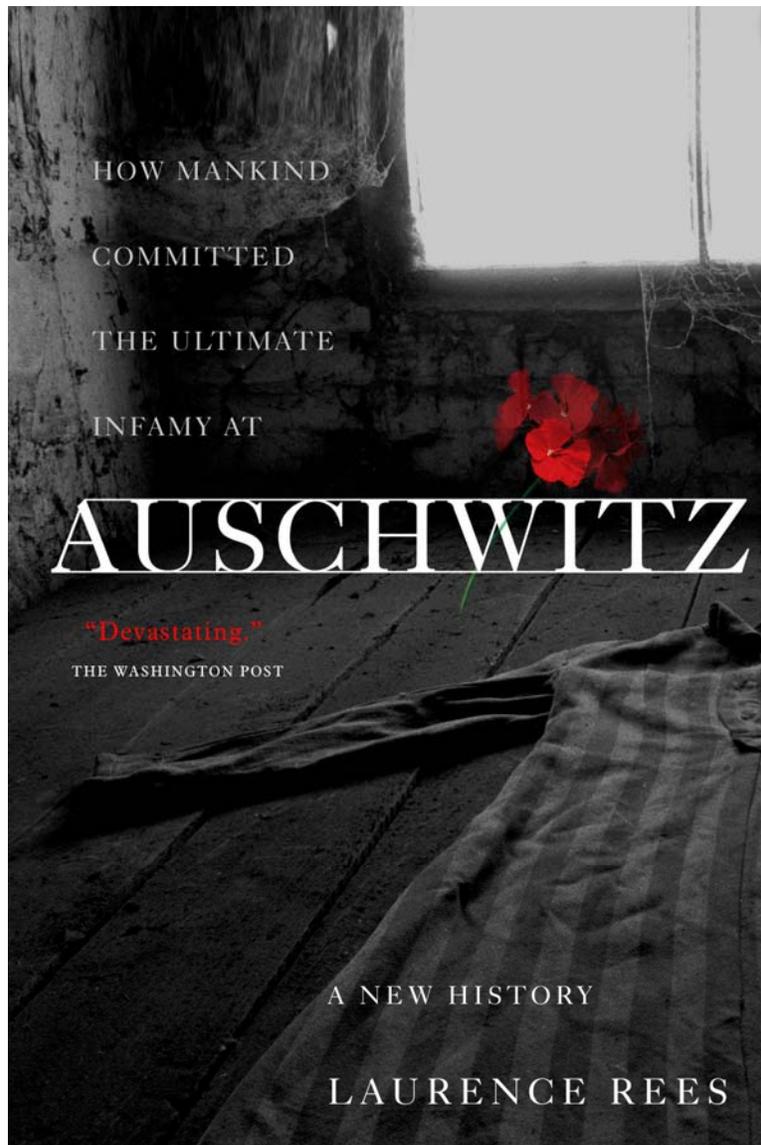


## A Teacher's Guide to



Auschwitz: A New History

Laurence Rees

1-58648-357-9

## About the Book

*Auschwitz: A New History* was written by Laurence Rees as the companion book to the major, 6-hour documentary co-produced by the BBC and KCET, *AUSCHWITZ: Inside the Nazi State*. Rees wrote and produced the series.

Painstakingly researched and including interviews of both the victims and perpetrators of the Nazi terror, *Auschwitz* represents a harrowing mix of history and testimonial. Using documents and other evidence, Rees presents a timeline for the Holocaust that exposes the Nazi murder machine as an often haphazardly evolving model rather than a pre-determined system of genocide. Meanwhile, Rees also paints a vivid and profoundly affecting picture of concentration camp life and death, and a window in to the mindsets of both prisoners and perpetrators, through actual interviews. Charting Auschwitz from its labor camp beginnings to its devastating end, Rees presents devastating yet scholarly history of the camp that represented the very deepest depths of human depravity.

## TEACHING AND READING GUIDE

### In the Classroom

In preparation for teaching about the Holocaust, a teacher may find it useful to read the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's Guidelines for Teaching About the Holocaust, which can be found at the following URL:

[http://www.ushmm.org/education/foreducators/teachabo/teaching\\_holcaust.pdf](http://www.ushmm.org/education/foreducators/teachabo/teaching_holcaust.pdf)

### Pre-Reading Activity

Have students research or bring in news clippings about other genocides, for example the current one in the Sudan or those in Bosnia and Rwanda in the 1990s. Have students discuss the following: What are the common elements between different genocides? What is the relationship between genocide and war? What would it be like to be persecuted, or to grow up under a World War?

## USING THIS GUIDE

To the Teacher:

**Reading and Understanding the Story** examines the reader's comprehension and retention of the book itself, and the story of Auschwitz as Rees and his interviewees relate to it. Students should refer to the narrative to answer these questions. **Themes and Context** encourages students to use the book as a lens into larger ideas, events, and issues. These questions encourage students to think freely and independently about the Holocaust and the broader moral and political debates that have stemmed from it. **Teaching Ideas** offers course-specific projects, essays, and discussion questions for classes: English/Language Arts, Geography, History, Science, and Social Studies.

## **READING AND UNDERSTANDING THE STORY**

### **Definitions**

Ask students to define the following terms with reference to the book or through outside research: genocide; the Wannsee Conference; Schutzstaffel (SS), SS Einsatzgruppen ; Führerprinzip; Kapo; Ghetto; National Socialist German Workers' (NAZI) Party; Fascism, Nuremberg.

Also ask them to research the following organizations and people: Rudolph Hess, Heinrich Himmler, Adolph Hitler, Rudolph Höss, Adolf Eichmann, Josef Mengele.

### **Comprehension**

Look at a map of Europe and/or use Google Maps. Locate Germany, Berlin, Poland, Auschwitz (Oswiecim in Polish), Dachau, Wannsee (in Berlin), Hungary, Sobibór.

The author makes a distinction between two kinds of camps: concentration camps and death camps. How were they different, and how did Nazi attitudes about them differ?

What were Kapos? How did they affect the interactions between prisoners and the camp social structure? What does “arbeit macht frei” mean?

What was “Block 11?” What was it used for? What effect did it have on the prisoners’ psyches? What was the significance of “Penal Reports 1 & 2?” What was the Little Red House?

What was I.G. Farben, and what was the significance of its arrival at Auschwitz? How did the Nazi mission change from September 1941 to March 1942?

Who were the Hlinka? What attitudes did they represent and on what kind of propaganda were they included?

What was the experience of the Jehovah’s Witnesses in Auschwitz like?

According to Toivi Blatt, how did the SS soldiers’ racial prejudices work against them at Sobibór?

What was the experience of the Danish Jews? Why, according to Rees, did Werner Best preside over a “lackluster” effort to capture them?

What was the deal that Joel Brand tried to negotiate between the Nazis and the Allies for the Hungarian Jews? What was the result?

What happened when survivors like Linda Breder returned to their homes? How were they received? What happened to Toivi Blatt’s house?

What event made Rudolph Höss start talking about his time at Auschwitz?

## **BROADER THEMES AND QUESTIONS**

**LOOKING AT HISTORY.** In the introduction, Laurence Rees “there is much in this book that is upsetting, but I still think it is a necessary piece of work.” Are “upsetting” events and eras of history ones we should study less or more? What kind of things must we keep in mind when studying or discussing emotionally charged periods in history? When looking at the Holocaust and other genocides, should we primarily use structural (i.e. looking at surrounding forces) or voluntarist (looking at the roles of particular people) approaches?

**FAMILY & FRIENDSHIP.** How did the treatment of prisoners and conditions both in and outside the camps affect friend and family relations? Where there any examples of actions in the book that would make one feel hopeful for the maintenance of such relations even in terrible times? What do you think was the role that ordinary Germans and non-Jews who did not face persecution played? Was it generally positive or negative?

**TRUSTWORTHINESS OF NARRATORS.** How trustworthy do you think the sources Rees uses at least partially as narrators are? Are some more trustworthy than others? What kind of incentives would different sources have to misrepresent the truth (or even to falsify it)? Does Rees’ multiplicity of sources make you more confident in his account’s accuracy than one person’s narrative? If so, why?

**PSEUDOSCIENCE, PROPAGANDA, & PREJUDICE.** What role did propaganda play in the execution of the Holocaust? How did Goebbels manipulate the populace, invent mythologies like Aryan racial superiority, and create patently false conspiracies such as the “stab in the back” of World War I? Why were his methods at spreading hate so effective? Were there any pre-existing conditions that made his anti-Semitic messages more attractive to the German populace? How can we prevent propaganda from having similar effects in the future?

**THE PERSON & THE SITUATION.** When asked what he had learned from his experience in Sobibór death camp, Toivi Blatt said: “Nobody knows themselves. All of us could be either good people or bad people in these [different] situations. Sometimes when somebody is really nice to me I find myself thinking, ‘How will he be in Sobibór?’” How much are different people to blame for the Holocaust? Can “following orders” be an acceptable excuse, or an understandable one, for the atrocities committed at Auschwitz and other camps? According to Rees, *were* those who enacted or furthered brutality generally just following orders? How was the psychology of the prisoner affected by the conditions in which he/she lived?

STATE TERROR AND THE LANGUAGE OF DISEASE. Rees describes a 1920 Nazi party propaganda poster that bearing the words "We fight [the Jews'] actions because they cause a racial tuberculosis of nations and we are convinced that convalescence can only begin after the bacteria is removed." As recently as the 1970s and 1980s, the Argentine military dictatorship described the killings of over 17,000 suspected leftists as "only a reaction to a sick [political] body." Terror and the language of disease have often gone hand in hand. From the obvious case of the Holocaust to the persecution of political dissidents under the military junta in Argentina and Augusto Pinochet in Chile, this style of speech has been used to justify persecution throughout history. Do you think this language is effective at convincing people that governments should persecute people within (and in the Nazi case, outside) their borders? Why or why not? Are there any ways that the "language of disease" can be neutralized as a propaganda tool, or reasons why it may come into use in political and/or economic cultures? Could its use represent a symptom of other problems within a society?

GEOGRAPHY AND CULTURE. Concentration camps like Auschwitz brought people of many different nationalities and cultures together under conditions of extreme stress and hardship. How did prisoners of different nationalities and cultures interact, and what were the roles of nationality and culture in these interactions? How did other nations and cultures interact with the Nazis? Was anti-Semitism a primarily "German" phenomenon?

## **TEACHING IDEAS**

### **English/Language Arts**

Some students may have relatives who are survivors of the Holocaust. If not, you might be able to find survivors in the area through Jewish organizations. Students could interview survivors about their experiences, and perhaps create projects making use of different media such as video, audio, or print.

Have students write their own imaginary account of survivor. How do students think survivors feel toward their captors? How is one changed by such a terrible experience?

### **History**

Create a timeline of Auschwitz' existence from the events related in the book.

To what extent did the United States government know about the Holocaust, and what was its reaction? Have students research American knowledge of the Holocaust. What kind of judgment should we hold on the Roosevelt administration? Who were the Americans who tried to help?

How did those not persecuted by the Nazis react? Were there examples of courage in the midst of a terrible tragedy? Have students research stories of those who assisted and/or hid Jews from the Nazis. If students are older than seventeen (the movie is rated R), they could watch *Schindler's List* in conjunction with their reading of *Auschwitz* to this end.

How was the Holocaust affected by the ideas of the Industrial Revolution?

### **Science**

What kind of effects would the conditions in a concentration camp have on the human body? Have students research human dietary needs, and compare their own diets to those of camp prisoners. What kind of diseases and afflictions would have been prevalent within the camps?

Zyklon-B and Scientific Ethics: How can something with a normally productive use (Zyklon-B was designed to be an insecticide) be misused for detrimental or even horrible means? What responsibilities (if any) do inventors of such technologies have? A comparative example for discussion might be the relationship between the study of nuclear physics and the creation of nuclear weapons.

### **Social Studies**

Have students read the UN Convention on the Crime of Genocide. What organizations report on instances of genocide today? Find examples of such reports in recent times. Distribute a template to the students and have them complete a rights report on one of these recent crises.

What kind of social relations were necessary to survive in Auschwitz and other concentration camps? Examine how social interactions and norms changed to abet survival. What would be the norms of social interaction that would be best for survival a concentration camp?

What kinds of economic and political conditions are most likely to result in the kind of hate and prejudice that led to the Holocaust? How can these conditions be avoided? Do you think that prejudice is something that is dependent on social and economic factors, or do you think it is a completely independent choice of the individual?

## **FOR FURTHER RESEARCH AND READING**

### **Websites**

<http://www.pbs.org/auschwitz/40-45/>

Website dedicated to the PBS series

<http://www.ushmm.org/>

Website for the United States Holocaust Museum

<http://www.holocaustsurvivors.org/>

Website with accounts of Holocaust survivors

<http://www.usc.edu/schools/college/vhi/>

Website for the Shoah Foundation at USC

### **Books**

Elie Wiesel, *Night* (1958).

Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz* or *If This Is A Man* (1958).

Anne Frank, *The Diary of a Young Girl* (1947).

Art Spiegelman, *Maus : A Survivor's Tale* (1991).

Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963).

### **Film and Video**

*Memorandum* (1965) [Documentary]

*Sophie's Choice* (1982)

*Schindler's List* (1993)

*La Vita è Bella (Life is Beautiful)* (1997)

*Uprising* (TV – 2002)

*The Pianist* (2002)