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Abstract

Holocaust research centers around the concentration camps and the well-known death camps such as Auschwitz-Birkenau. I choose to veer towards examining the efficiencies of another death camp, Treblinka. By analyzing the different factors that went into the operation of Treblinka, I examine the individual efficiencies as well as the working whole. By analyzing the individual facets of Treblinka, such as personnel and the extermination methods used, I aim to demonstrate that Treblinka not only managed to integrate prior techniques with new ones but also ran at the utmost efficiency that the Nazi officials strove to achieve. I utilize the descriptions of the everyday camp life by both prisoners and officials, as well as maps and layouts of the camp and gas chambers as published in multiple books and testimonies to support these analyses. This paper challenges the established opinion that Auschwitz and other concentration camps remain the most efficient places of extermination. Some of the analyses provide a view of the same level of efficiency, but a careful examination of the statistics of deaths and time of operation renders support to the view proposed by this paper.

Introduction

Unterscharführer Willi Mentz, one of the deadliest overseers of the Holocaust worked as an essential officer for the entire existence of Treblinka II, the killing camp of Treblinka. Tasked with supervising the extermination of the sick, old, and “troublemakers” who arrived in the

prisoner transports, he served a key role in Treblinka's extermination process. By convincing the other victims that officials took these prisoners to get treated in the so-called infirmary, or *lazaret*, the extermination process ran smoothly and quickly, allowing for more than one transport a day to be processed. These prisoners did not receive medical help, instead, they lost their lives at the hands of Willi Mentz. Having them sit down in rows in front of a pit, Mentz shot all the prisoners he received and pushed them into the pit, which, when he was done, was lit on fire to destroy the evidence of the massacres. Mentz killed an estimated 10,000 prisoners, almost all shot inside the "Red Cross" tent.¹

Treblinka's total death toll is estimated at around 850,000 prisoners.² Compared to other extermination camps' death counts, Treblinka ranks second among most prisoners killed, with Auschwitz killing the most, an estimated 1.1 million. As opposed to Auschwitz, Treblinka operated only as an extermination camp, opening in July 1942 and closing in July 1944, a month before the Red Army entered Treblinka. Operation Reinhard officials stopped gassing operations (October 1943) well before the official close date; Treblinka had to officially close later due to the need for extensive clean-up to erase all traces of genocide. Treblinka officials operated the gas chambers and other methods of killing for 14 months, the shortest period of operation for all death camps, while in comparison, Auschwitz operated for almost 4 years and killed almost 200,000 more – a count from hard labor as well as extermination methods. We can conclude from this comparison that Treblinka officials operated at a higher efficiency.

As Treblinka was built, Operation Reinhard officials implemented and improved upon techniques implemented by Sobibór and Belzec that they deemed in need of improvement. As well as creating an efficient method of moving prisoners throughout the various stages of the execution process. Treblinka used the common method of gas chambers, the aforementioned personal shootings of Willi Mentz, and, later on, forced labor in Treblinka I. Treblinka officials established Treblinka I to help quicken the movement of prisoners to the gas chambers, but officials focused the camp mainly on sorting items taken from luggage or bodies, utilizing specialized "shops" that sorted through gold, hair, clothes, valuables, etc.³ Globocnik ordered Treblinka I to be shut down

¹ Yitzhak Arad, *The Operation Reinhard Death Camps*, (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2018), 158.

² Štěpková, Tereza. "Treblinka," Holocaust.cz. 9 May 2011.

<https://www.holocaust.cz/en/history/concentration-camps-and-ghettos/treblinka-3/>

³ Arad, *The Operation Reinhard Death Camps*, 320.

after the prisoner revolt in August of 1943, as SS officers cleared almost all of the ghettos in Poland, rendering Operation Reinhard complete, and therefore closing Treblinka and sending all remaining transports to Auschwitz.⁴ If the revolt had not destroyed the gas chambers, Treblinka may have remained operational in preference to Auschwitz, considering its higher operational efficiency. It took nine months to completely erase all traces of genocide. Considering that Treblinka closed before it could be liberated, due to destroyed gas chambers, not inefficiency, Treblinka should be discussed more often about the Holocaust and death camps, as Treblinka officials operated with the utmost efficiency. Because of this efficiency and the various forms of execution implemented in Treblinka, Treblinka is the ultimate symbol of the Holocaust and Nazi ideology.

Jewish Life in Nazi Germany and Movement towards the Final Solution

Following the Nuremberg Laws of 1935 and other pogroms focused on stripping Jews of their rights, Jewish life quality in Germany quickly declined, as with few rights left, Jews could be taken into concentration camps just for being Jewish. World War II brought even more suffering and hardships to Jews both inside Germany and the concentration camps, and in occupied territories; testimonies and memoirs illustrate the worst experiences occurring during the War. Drawing from Aktion T-4 methods and personnel, the SS established the Death Camps starting in 1940, a main aspect of why the War brought worse treatment.

Reinhard Heydrich used the shutdown of Aktion T-4 to start the implementation of Operation Reinhard and the Final Solution. Heydrich called secondary Nazi officials to the Wannsee Conference – in January 1942, although initially scheduled for December 1941 – to inform them of this implementation.⁵ Although Hitler and other high-ranking SS officials already knew, the Wannsee Conference recorded the first official documentation of Operation Reinhard and the intent to vanquish the Jewish race, with the outlining of the extermination process starting with transports. Heydrich established that the Reinhard camps would be in the General Government district in Poland, due to the inability to transport the prisoners long distances because of the strain on resources. Heydrich did not always intend for announcing the early implementation of the Final solution, but as the US had declared war, but now, with no end to the war in sight, Hitler decided to proceed with the Final solution earlier.

⁴ Arad, *The Operation Reinhard Death Camps*, 429.

⁵ Wachsmann, *KL*, 295.

Heydrich and the conference designed Operation Reinhard to include three camps: Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka. The SS built Belzec and Sobibor in late 1941 and spring of 1942, while they built Treblinka in July 1942. SS officials constructed Treblinka with improvements upon what they had observed to be inefficient in Belzec and Sobibor. Treblinka still followed the use of carbon-monoxide gassing in the gas chambers, as opposed to vans and Zyklon B in other death camps.⁶

Building Treblinka

Treblinka included two camps: Treblinka I, the labor camp, and Treblinka II, the extermination camp. Treblinka I opened on September 1, 1941, as a forced labor camp, mainly holding a workforce composed of civilians sent on the accusation of crimes—mainly composed of people falsely accused and certain “asocial” types, like previous inmates. Among the prisoners were Jews (German, Czech, French), Polish farmers unable to deliver food requisitions, hostages trapped by chance, and people who attempted to harbor Jews outside the Jewish ghettos or who performed restricted actions without permits, although inside the camp starting in 1942, officials separated Jews from non-Jews for extermination reasons.

Treblinka I replaced a company set up to gain land in Poland. Most of the prisoners worked at the quarry, sometimes called the gravel mine, and later harvested wood from the nearby forest to use at Treblinka II – they needed the wood for the mass cremation pyres after Himmler ordered the camp leaders to unbury the mass graves and cremate all the corpses to destroy as much evidence of genocide as they could. They also separated women and men during the War because of the need for sorting and repair of military clothes from the war; men continued to work at the gravel mine. After 1943, Treblinka I prisoners carried out no specific sentences; the Nazis forced them into hard labor without giving them any set number of days, months, or years, blatantly disregarding any type of justice system to gain workers to provide for the Reich.

Treblinka II began operating in July 1942, following four months of construction to build three different sections: the administrative compound for SS personnel, the receiving area of prisoner transports, and the gas chambers. The entire camp consisted of around 20 hectares, considerably smaller than notable concentration death camps of the Third Reich. In order to signify the border of the camp and keep prisoners of both transport and the *Kommandos*, a two-layered barbed

⁶ Wachsmann, *KL*, 312.

wire fence surrounded the entire area; later, the workers wove pine branches into the fence to conceal the camp from the arriving prisoners' view – which helped to keep them in the dark for a majority of their journey into the camp because they could not see the gas chambers.⁷ This addition to the fence near where the trains approached kept the arrivals thinking they were stopping at a train station to go to another concentration camp – not the end of their lives – effectively letting guards in charge of receiving them do their job more efficiently than other methods would allow – in comparison to the lineup at Auschwitz-Birkenau that created an atmosphere of anxiety and panic.

Affecting the look of a train station, Operation Reinhard authorities built the second part of Treblinka II around train tracks as the receiving area. Later they disguised even more of the reception camp, painting the storage barracks as a railway station with ticket windows and “lounges”. They did not require a large track, as prisoners came in overfull, small trains over the course of multiple months – the Warsaw Ghetto took several months to completely liquidate.⁸ They did not want prisoners to be in a state of panic when shepherding them into the gas chambers, so they took several approaches during the transfer process. The first of these approaches happened immediately when prisoners exited the trains: telling them that they get cleaned up before they boarded another train. The second involved guards ushering them quickly towards the gas chambers, making them run so they couldn't wonder what they were walking into. Overall, only a few prisoners realized they were going to die before they got to the chambers themselves.

Originally, Treblinka contained three gassing chambers disguised as showers, which were interconnected and ran for around 8 meters in length and 4 meters in width. Officials screened off the gas chambers from the railway tracks as well as from the administrative portions of the camp, intending to hide them from view and to keep the victims from figuring out where they were going. A fenced-off path, called “the tube,” connected the undressing areas to the gas chambers. Officials led prisoners on this path when all of them had been prepared for extermination. The SS and prisoners also cynically nicknamed it “die Himmelstraße (“the road to heaven”).⁹

Along the sides of the gas chambers, prisoners of the commando

⁷ Arad, *The Operation Reinhard Death Camps*, 63.

⁸ Arad, *The Operation Reinhard Death Camps*, 455-461.

⁹ Ana Tusa and John Tusa, *The Nuremberg Trials*, (New York City, MJF Books, 2010), 200.

dug burial ditches that hid the corpses of previous victims. Officials replaced the ditches later on with cremation pyres following the orders of Himmler, who had discovered that the original orders to cremate had not been followed during his visit to Treblinka in February 1943.¹⁰ These cremation pyres were used to burn the bodies already buried as well as prisoners exterminated during the last year of operation.

Personnel

Irmfried Eberl, the first Treblinka commander, transferred from the euthanasia program into Operation Reinhard.¹¹ His experience in *Aktion T-4* made him stand out to be chosen as the first Treblinka commander. During his tenure as commander, Eberl wanted to exterminate more Jews than the current gas chambers could take. He ordered more transports of Jews to be sent to Treblinka than could be unloaded and exterminated in one day, causing backups and more work than could be managed. One example of this occurred over a hot period in the summer, causing many people inside the transport trains to die of "the intense heat... At the time whole mountains of bodies lay on the platform," as testified by Willi Mentz.¹² The camp could not conceal the bodies and the stench of death that drifted to the nearby towns due to the extreme numbers of extermination that required completion before clean-up could begin. Eberl wanted to reach the highest possible numbers of extermination and exceed all other camps, but due to the inefficiency of his command, with untimely and inefficient killing processes, Operation Reinhard's command dismissed Eberl from being Treblinka commander in August 1942.

Franz Stangl replaced Eberl because Stangl proved himself to be a competent commander of an extermination camp during his tenure as Sobibor commander. When the T-4 program disbanded, Stangl accepted an offer to work in the General Government and help manage Operation Reinhard. Stangl proved himself to be an extremely competent leader of extermination, causing him to be sought after to organize Treblinka after the incompetence of Eberl. Globcnik felt that Stangl could restore order in Treblinka because he had a reputation as a highly competent administrator and manager with an excellent grasp of detail. Instead of immersing himself in the workings of the camp, Stangl rarely participated in the everyday activities of the camp, instead deciding to decorate and clean the camp. He also wore white, an elusive, clean

¹⁰ Arad, *The Operation Reinhard Death Camps*, 215.

¹¹ Arad, *The Operation Reinhard Death Camps*, 235.

¹² E. Klee, W. Dressen, V. Riess, "*The Good Old Days*": *The Holocaust as Seen by Its Perpetrators and Bystanders*, (New York, The Free Press, 1988), 245-247.

color for a death camp, and drank heavily, suggesting an affected mental state. His rare participation meant that he limited his contact with the prisoners, and he said that he came to think of them as "...cargo. I think it started the day I first saw the *Totenlager* [extermination area]...I rarely saw them as individuals."¹³ He also claimed that his dedication to the extermination of the Jewish prisoners was not because he hated them, but that he viewed it as destroying material objects and "garbage" to be dealt with, increasing the speed at which prisoners were processed, but at the cost of carelessness.

Stangl oversaw the building of the new gas chambers that increased the efficiency of the camp. He built these larger gas chambers to work in concert with the older gas chambers. Jacob Wiernik overheard Stangl remarking when they finished construction, "Finally the Jewish City is ready."¹⁴ The gas chambers became much more effective, but the Treblinka prisoner uprising caused Stangl to leave. A very organized revolt almost successfully helped all the commandos escape, but many were killed escaping or were captured later and killed, although some escaped and survived the rest of the Holocaust. After the revolt, Stangl transferred with the head of Operation Reinhard to Italy to campaign against Jews.

Kurt Franz replaced Stangl in mid-August 1943. Franz only remained commander for about three months, supervising the last of the Holocaust trains processing and the clean-up of Treblinka as a whole. He transferred from Belzec to Treblinka in August of 1942, and he quickly climbed the ranks in Treblinka. Following his promotion to the camp commandant, he supervised the different work commandos, the processing of trains, and the transfer process from the trains to the chambers. The prisoners thought he had a baby-like face and therefore nicknamed him "lalke" (doll in Polish).¹⁵ His nickname and appearance did not represent his cruel personality, which was proven to be even more vicious with the use of his dog, Barry. Barry and Franz as a combination around the camp struck fear into the hearts of prisoners and SS guards alike, but Franz seemed to be a cruel influence on Barry, as Barry without Franz around would act like a normal dog, illustrating the immense cruelty and sadistic tendencies Franz had.¹⁶ Using his dog as well as his own body and weapon, he cruelly tormented prisoners

¹³ Gitta Sereny, *Into the Darkness: From Mercy Killing to Mass Murder*, (London, McGraw-Hill, 1974), 200-201.

¹⁴ Arad, *The Operation Reinhard Death Camps*, 234.

¹⁵ "The Treblinka Perpetrators," deathcamps.org. 23 September 2006. <http://www.deathcamps.org/treblinka/perpetrators.html>.

¹⁶ Alexander Donat, *The Death Camp Treblinka: A Documentary*, (New York: Holocaust Library, 1979), 313.

further than any other SS guard at Treblinka, for example, he enjoyed shooting prisoners as a joke, using them as pushing bags, and would usually kill all of his chosen victims.¹⁷

Methods of Extermination

Treblinka used a few different methods to efficiently kill all of the Jewish and prisoners that were judged to not conform to *volks-gemeinschaft* that arrived at the camp. Since Treblinka was built last out of the three Reinhard camps, Treblinka architects could combine efficient methods from the other two camps, and officials could add in other methods they thought would improve efficiency. The main methods used to exterminate all of the arriving prisoners were the use of gassing, shooting them at the *Lazaret*, and shooting them if they to unruly in the *Sonderkommandos*.

The Nazis did not implement gas chambers in every concentration camp. Gas chambers were a common feature in the extermination camps, and are most often thought of in connection to Auschwitz. The Operation Reinhard camps depended heavily on the use of their gas chambers, because, unlike Auschwitz, they could not contain 100s or 1000s of prisoners to work, as the Reinhard camps were not built as labor camps. Reinhard architects used Auschwitz's gas chambers as a model to base the Reinhard camps' chambers. They built Treblinka's gas chambers off of the use of three different camps' chambers and how to improve the design more effectively and efficiently to kill more prisoners. The architects believed that they created the most effective design yet for Treblinka.

The original gas chambers' design included having the gassing area fenced off by tall wooden fencing. The fence surrounded three interconnected barracks, 26 feet by 13 feet, disguised as showers, with the walls and ceilings coated by roofing paper and the floors covered in tin-plated sheet metal.¹⁸ The doors were made from solid wood with insulation of rubber, and could only be bolted from the outside with a heavy cross-bar. The SS originally used a Red Army tank engine to provide the gas fumes into the chambers, which took a long time to kill than other methods used later. The exhaust fumes ran through a pipe below the ground before opening into the three chambers from below. These original gas chambers leaked fumes from their walls making the whole process take around 20 minutes.

¹⁷ Arad, *The Operation Reinhard Death Camps*, 239.

¹⁸ Arad, *The Operation Reinhard Death Camps*, 65.

An *Aktion T-4* expert guided the building of new, larger, and more efficient gas chambers. Instead of being built with wood and being insulated by tin and roofing materials, they built a large concrete building from bricks and mortar, which prevented leaks. The building contained several chambers ranging from eight to ten with a corridor through the center, making them much larger than the original chambers. The building also had metal doors with windows to observe the extermination process. The new chambers used two engines instead of the original one, decreasing the time of extermination. The capacity of the gas chambers increased from 12,000-15,000 prisoners in a day to up to 22,000-25,000 people every day, although they were rarely used to full capacity.¹⁹ The process of extermination in the chambers strictly followed the preparation of victims after arrival, with men going first due to the women needing to be shaved.

The use of exhaust fumes compared to Zyklon B was a decision made for all Operation Reinhard camps. Prisoners in Treblinka died due to suffocation and carbon monoxide poisoning, not due to poison gas. Rudolf Höss thought this to be inefficient compared to his own camp's chambers (Auschwitz), which used Zyklon B.²⁰ The new chambers only took 12 minutes to gas the number of people fit into the chamber. The amount of time it took for Zyklon B was around 20 minutes, and Zyklon B was more dangerous to operate, making SS and *Sonderkommandos* have to wait more time to open the chambers and extract bodies. In almost every camp, the chambers were overcrowded to reduce time spent gassing and the amount of gas used, which caused more work for prisoner commandos, but allowed for more transports to be "processed".

As aforementioned, Willi Mentz ran the killing of prisoners at the Lazaret. The architects built the Lazaret as a fake infirmary, even including a Red Cross sign to disguise its true purpose from prisoners. At the train tracks, SS guards separated the old, sick, weak, and wounded from the rest of the prisoners. They sent these select few, along with anyone who started to be unruly and "difficult" – mainly those who figured out what was happening to them and started to resist – to Mentz and his supervisor at the Lazaret. Behind the fake infirmary shack architects made an open pit around 20 feet deep. Mentz sat his victims on the edge of this pit and shot them dead into the pit. He shot them when they were facing him so that they would fall into the pit, making the process more efficient as he would not have to push the bodies in before cremating them. This method of extermination killed thousands

¹⁹ Arad, *The Operation Reinhard Death Camps*, 156.

²⁰ Ana Tusa and John Tusa, *The Nuremberg Trials*, 320.

of prisoners, mainly by Mentz, but also by his supervisor, August Miete – nicknamed the “Angel of Death”.²¹

The least commonly used method of extermination was mainly used for getting rid of old *Sonderkommando* members, to make way for stronger and newer prisoners. The SS shot weak working prisoners for enjoyment, and also to improve efficiency. Like in other camps, prisoners were shot at roll call, while working, and purely for amusement, mainly because of misbehavior and weakness. Some SS officials used other ways to amuse themselves at the expense of the prisoners’ lives. Kurt Franz used his dog to kill prisoners, as well as fight them.²² He usually fought them for a minute, and then shot them, purely for his amusement. The SS guards also shot prisoners before they entered the gas chambers. They rarely resorted to this option, as the prisoners were about to be exterminated. They only shot the prisoners if they started to try to resist or panic before they could be moved into the chambers. This occurred with the women and children, and the second rounds of men, because they had to stand outside of the chambers before they were sent in, which meant they could hear the screams and figure out what they were heading into. This method killed the fewest number of prisoners but was a common occurrence, especially if it was for amusement.

Concluding Thoughts

The number of Holocaust victims totals around 11 million, including the 6 million Jewish victims with the deaths of other persecuted groups. Out of the 11 million killed, an estimated 700,000-900,000 Jews lost their lives in Treblinka. Around 1,000 *Sonderkommando* passed through the camp throughout its 14-month operation. Not all of the victims of Treblinka fell victim to the gas chambers, but the elderly and some workers were shot and killed by SS officials. The ethnicity of most of the victims was Polish, as many of the trains “processed” at Treblinka traveled from the Warsaw Ghetto, as well as other nearby towns and ghettos. Few transports came from foreign territories, but of the foreign transports, Treblinka received ones from Bohemia and Moravia, Thrace, Macedonia, and Pirot. Transports coming to Treblinka took other victims, such as Romanis, of which a total of 2000 came and died at Treblinka; none survived.²³

Unlike Auschwitz, there were very few survivors from Treblinka.

²¹ Arad, *The Operation Reinhard Death Camps*, 158.

²² *Ibid.*, 238.

²³ *Ibid.*, 181.

Some survived after they were transferred to another camp, but the main reason there are few survivors of Treblinka is the Treblinka prisoner revolt. Prisoners from both Treblinka I and II communicated via underground resistance to plan their uprising. Initially, to take place in June 1943 (after about 6 months of planning), they postponed their revolt because of key leaders' deaths and setbacks in plans. They finally revolted on August 2, 1943, and caused chaos in the camp. Around 200 prisoners escaped the camp, but only 100 managed to survive past the next few weeks. The revolt destroyed the gas chambers to the extent that the SS decided to shut down the camp instead of fixing them and continuing Treblinka's operation. The remaining prisoners, after the gas chambers closed, cleaned up the camp, and then were sent to the other Reinhard camps or other concentration camps to work or be exterminated.

The destruction of the gas chambers marked the end of the extermination operation of Treblinka. The methods of extermination in combination with the efficiency of its commanders created a well-run operation that could not be reproduced in another camp. The reports from visiting commanders like Rudolf Höss must be analyzed with the knowledge that they had a bias for seeing their camp as the most efficient, due to the fierce competition to be a commander and remain one. The reports do relay information about the relative efficiency of Treblinka when compared to other camps, as well as information on the differences in prisoner ratios. Treblinka mainly executed Jewish prisoners, except for a few other transports of other ethnic groups, which was not as strictly done in other concentration and death camps that also held Soviet citizens and prisoners of war. Due to this victim ratio, Treblinka reflected the Nazi ideology more so than other camps, which, when taken into consideration with its extermination efficiency, makes Treblinka the most accurate symbol of the Holocaust.

Ultimately, Reinhard officials effectively combined all of the most efficient execution methods of the Holocaust into one camp, Treblinka. Utilizing observations from existing camps, as well as experimenting with other ideas of covering up and implementing mass genocide, the Nazis succeeded in creating Treblinka a symbol for Nazi ideology. Although Treblinka represents the epitome of Nazi racial goals, Treblinka remains overlooked, and main officials remained unpunished for years until the Treblinka trials of 1964, which took place on little evidence of the camp's existence and the small collection of survivor testimony and only punished a quarter of the total personnel. The trials did not receive the same amount of attention as the Nuremberg Trials did, considering how long after the

war they took place and the severe lack of evidence and survivors. This connects to the popular opinion about the efficiency of Auschwitz; the lack of discussion about Treblinka's efficiency should be addressed, as more research into the camp may lead to a recognition of how to avoid future atrocities. Further research will not only help to prevent but also help to remember those who fell victim to the efficient, intolerance of the Nazi regime.

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