

Episode Guide: Surprising Beginnings

March 1940–September 1941

Adolf Hitler salutes his followers at a Nazi Party rally soon after his appointment as Chancellor.

Overview

"Surprising Beginnings" (**Disc 1, Title 1, 47:45**) sets the stage for the series and examines the radical increase in violence against all opponents of the Nazi state during this 18-month period. In particular, the program explores the importance of the German Army's invasion of the Soviet Union during the summer of 1941 and connects this campaign to the first gassing experiments in Auschwitz, which were aimed at Russian prisoners of war, not Jews.

In the program's Follow-up Discussion (**Disc 2, Bonus Features, Title 7, 7:51**), Linda Ellerbee talks with Michael Berenbaum, professor of theology at the University of Judaism in Los Angeles and author of *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Nazi Death Camp* (published in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum by Indiana University Press, 1994), and Melvin Jules Bukiet, professor of creative writing at Sarah Lawrence College and editor of and contributor to *Nothing Makes You Free: Writings by Descendants of Jewish Holocaust Survivors* (W. W. Norton, 2002). Bukiet is part of the so-called second generation, the children of survivors.

Target Audience: Grades 9-12 social studies, history, and English courses

Student Learning Goals

- Discuss how and when the Nazis came to power.
- Describe the Nazi philosophy of ethnic purity.
- Tell when, how, and why Auschwitz came into being and describe its population and living conditions in 1940–1941.
- Explain the importance of the Soviet Union to Germany.
- Explore the moral dilemmas faced by both prisoners and perpetrators.
- Identify some specific choices made by the Nazis during this period, tell what factors led to the choices, and discuss what other options might have been available.

Content Synopsis

The chapter numbers, titles, and times below correspond to the two-videodisc set of Auschwitz: Inside the Nazi State published by BBC Video (E2113).

1. **Auschwitz (Start: 00:00; Length: 3:21):** We have learned a great deal about the evolution of Auschwitz since the fall of the USSR and the opening of archives in Eastern Europe. Newly available documents help us see Auschwitz within the Nazis' larger plan for the conquest of Eastern Europe and the annihilation of the Jews.
2. **Origins (Start: 03:21; Length: 8:00):** Auschwitz, the site of the largest mass murder in the history of the world, did not start out as a death camp. In the spring of 1940, Rudolf Höss, a captain in the SS (*Schutzstaffel*), the elite defense organization that answered only to Hitler and advanced his plans, became commandant of a new Nazi concentration camp in the southern Polish town of Oswiecim, which the Germans called Auschwitz. Auschwitz was in the middle of territory Hitler had invaded the previous year. Höss was directed to create a concentration camp for ten thousand prisoners in former Polish army barracks. Auschwitz I, as the camp was called, was built primarily to confine and oppress Polish political prisoners, whom the Nazis considered a threat to their occupation. Polish Jews were confined elsewhere in Europe, primarily in ghettos. Höss adopted the motto of Dachau, another concentration camp where he had previously worked: *Arbeit Macht Frei* ("Work Makes You Free"). The Polish prisoners were subjected to appalling treatment from the SS. More than ten thousand died within 20 months. The camp received little support from Nazi headquarters and Höss often had to scrounge for supplies. Höss, however, lived well, treating the prisoners as his slaves. Józef Paczynski, a Polish political prisoner who also was forced to be Höss's barber, and Kazimierz Piechowski, another Polish political prisoner, describe their experiences.
3. **Transformation (Start: 11:21; Length: 8:45):** The area around Auschwitz was rich in natural resources (fresh water, lime, coal), which made it an excellent location for IG Farben, the industrial conglomerate, to build a factory that would manufacture war materials. Industrialization interested Heinrich Himmler, the head of Hitler's SS squad. Himmler hoped that IG Farben's activities would fund the creation of a model Nazi settlement where prisoners would work as slave laborers and the SS would get rich selling coal and gravel to IG Farben. He planned a grand apartment for himself at Auschwitz and ordered Höss to triple the camp's capacity. One aspect of Hitler's grand plan was to demonize the Soviets and invade the Soviet Union, in part because he feared communism and in part because he thought Russians were less civilized than Germans and would be easy to beat, as described by Hans Friedrich, a member of the 1st SS Infantry Brigade.

4. **Strategic Planning (Start: 20:06; Length: 10:54):** Hitler thought he would starve the Soviets in order to use Soviet resources to feed the German Army. Germany invaded the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941. Of the three million Soviets taken prisoner in the invasion, two million were dead within nine months, either shot immediately or worked to death in concentration camps. The Nazis had been ardent antisemites for a long time. Among other reasons, they believed an alleged Jewish conspiracy had somehow lost World War I for Germany and that the combination of Slavs, Jews, and communism was particularly dangerous. During the invasion of the Soviet Union, Germans shot many male Jews and encouraged local uprisings against Jews. This behavior escalated after a meeting in July 1941 between Reichsführer Adolf Hitler and Himmler. Soon Jewish women and children were being killed as well. In fact, whole towns (e.g., Ostrog in the western part of Ukraine) were virtually eliminated. Hans Friedrich, a German soldier describes his feelings and motivation for participating in these slaughters; Vasyl Valdeman, a survivor, recounts his own memories of the killings.
5. **Adult Euthanasia Program (Start: 31:00; Length: 9:38):** The Nazis did not want to keep alive any prisoners who could not work. An adult Euthanasia Program (T4), which at first targeted mentally and physically disabled adults, was extended to severely disabled children. At first these populations were removed to special institutions inside Germany, in which they were killed in shower rooms by piping in carbon monoxide. But Himmler wanted to extend this program to concentration camps, including Auschwitz, to eliminate the need to transport people who could not work. Shooting people at close range was becoming inefficient so various SS officers experimented with other methods of killing, including the use of carbon monoxide and explosives.
6. **Zyklon B (Start: 40:38; Length: 7:07)** Himmler soon realized he needed a better method of killing—better for the murderers, not for their victims. One of Höss's deputies at Auschwitz developed a more efficient method that featured crystallized prussic acid, an insecticide that was mass-produced under the trade name Zyklon B. It had previously been used to disinfect prisoners' clothes. When the crystals dissolved in air, they created a lethal gas, asphyxiating those trapped in the room. The corpses were later taken to a crematorium.
7. **Follow-up Discussion (Disc 2, Bonus Features, Title 7, Length: 7:51):** Professors Berenbaum and Bukiet discuss a range of issues, including why it took a generation for the world to begin to talk openly about the Holocaust, the power of the media, what it means to be part of the second generation (the children of survivors), how the Holocaust has changed history, and what young people can do to prevent future genocide.

Learning Resources

Timeline: 1917–1942

Biographies: Jerzy Bilecki, Reinhard Heydrich, Heinrich Himmler, Adolf Hitler, Rudolf Höss, August Kowalczyk, Artur Nebe, **Józef Paczynski**, **Kazimierz Piechowski**, **Kazimierz Smolen**, Josef Stalin, **Vasyl Valdeman**, Albert Widmann

(boldface indicates people interviewed in the program; others are mentioned or seen in archival films or dramatizations)

Glossary: annihilation, antisemitism, Arbeit Macht Frei, Auschwitz, bolsheviks, collaborator, communism, concentration camps, Eastern Europe, ethnic Germans, Euthanasia Program, extermination camps, Final Solution, gas chamber, Gaulieter, Kommandatur, Nazi, perpetrators, propaganda, Red Square, Reichsführer, Soviet Union, SS, Stammlager, wehrmacht, World War II, Zyklon B

Readings:

- 1.1. "Deadly Medicine: Creating the Master Race" (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum)
- 1.2. "The Order of Nature" (Lisa Pine)
- 1.3. "Europe Late" (Dan Pagis)
- 1.4. "Babi Yar" (Yevgeny Yevtushenko)

Additional Resources:

Pyramid of Hate (Anti-Defamation League and Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation)

Before Viewing the Episode

It is vitally important to set the stage for this program if you have not done so already. Discuss 1918 to 1939 (see the Timeline), which include the end of World War I, the Treaty of Versailles, Germany's invasions of Czechoslovakia, Austria, and Poland; the adoption of the Nuremberg Laws; Kristallnacht; the refusal of many countries, including the United States, to accept passengers fleeing Germany on the German passenger ship the SS *St. Louis*; and the start of Hitler's Euthanasia Program.

Post-Viewing Discussion

- History is not inevitable; it emerges from a series of choices made by individuals and groups. Particularly in these early stages, each step should be clearly identified. Refer also to the Timeline for chronological details. Ask students: What are the particular choices made during this period and who makes them? What other options might they have had?
- What do you learn about the Nazi belief system in this program? What seem to be the Nazis' primary motivations?
- Among the most basic Nazi beliefs was the study of eugenics, sometimes called racial hygiene. At its core is the idea that by eliminating people with defects and only letting people with desirable characteristics reproduce, a perfect race could be achieved. These ideas were widespread in the 1920s, not only in Germany but worldwide. To help students understand these ideas, introduce **Reading 1.1. Deadly Medicine: Creating the Master Race**, and **Reading 1.2. The Order of Nature**, which is a more sociological view of the same subject and describes how Germans indoctrinated people with their thinking. *Discuss:*
 - In 1948 the United Nations defined genocide as "any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group, including killing members of the group, causing serious bodily harm to members of the group, deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part, imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group, and forcibly transferring children of the group to another group." How do these readings relate to this definition?
 - Lisa Pine asks: What is more important, the race from which one stems, or the nest in which one grows up? What do you think?
 - What messages about particular groups (e.g., African Americans, Latinos, whites, Jews, fathers, mothers, families, police, women) are conveyed today through television and other mass media? How do these messages compare with what you know of these groups? Have you ever seen a portrayal of a member of your own ethnic group that you felt was inappropriate and/or demeaning? Describe it and discuss what actions you might take to overturn such portrayals.
- Why were the Nazis so intent on invading the Soviet Union? Why was the Soviet Union important to them?

- The Anti-Defamation League and the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation have developed a **Pyramid of Hate**. As a class or in small groups, have students analyze segments from the episode and assign different events/actions to a level of the pyramid. Have students assign experiences in their own lives to different levels of the pyramid.
- As people have learned about the Holocaust, many have asked, "Why didn't the prisoners do more to protect themselves?" In this program, some prisoners share their thinking. Józef Paczynski, for example, says, "Do you know what would have happened? My whole family would have been destroyed, and in his place [referring to Höss, whose hair he cut], someone else would have come." Kazimierz Piechowski says, "Think about where to go at work to survive the following day, just to survive the following day. Watch your bread, so that no one steals it, so that you get to eat some breakfast. . . .Be vigilant. You have to survive." How do you respond to these statements? What do you think the long-term effect would be on people who are forced to live like this?
- Compare the statements of the prisoners with those of the perpetrators. One perpetrator, for example, explains his actions this way: "Because my hatred towards the Jews is too great. I admit my thinking on this point is unjust. . . .But what I experienced from my earliest youth . . . what the Jews were doing to us—well that will never change. That is my unshakeable conviction." What kinds of messages about other people do we learn from our parents? How important are these messages in determining how we behave as adults? How can you know when you are a child that something you learn is wrong or misinformation?
- Portions of this program are based on the memoirs of Rudolf Höss. What is a memoir? How is it different from a diary? What other memoirs have you read or experienced?
- What do you learn about Höss in this program? What kind of a man was he? (Note: The series follows Höss throughout, so this discussion can be ongoing.) Students might also be assigned responsibility for researching and presenting brief biographies of some of the major perpetrators in the series, for example, Hitler, Himmler, Heinrich, Höss, Mengele, Eichmann. How are they like and unlike Höss as leaders?
- Introduce **Reading 1.3. "Europe, Late"** by Dan Pagis and **Reading 1.4. "Babi Yar"** by Yevgeny Yevtushenko, both of which are Holocaust-related poems.
Discuss:
 - In "Europe, Late," the narrator asks—and then answers—the time frame of this poem. Why do you think Pagis would include this information and in this way? What was the situation in Europe in 1939? How much did the average person know about what was happening in the Nazi ranks at that time?

- Most of "Europe, Late" refers to pleasant events and situations, but midway through, the narrator mentions "slapping down/the worried newspapers." What does this suggest about people's attitudes? Why would they want to slap down the papers?
 - How do the last two lines in the poem help readers realize Pagis's real point? What is the significance of the fact that the poem ends without any final punctuation?
 - In "Babi Yar," how does Yevtushenko disassociate himself in the poem from those he suggests are not true Russians?
 - At about the midpoint in the poem is the suggestion of a positive action Jews may take. What is it? Why is it significant he would connect these with the coming of spring?
 - Why do you think the narrator confesses at the end of the poem to not being a Jew? And how does that, in the context of the poem, make him a "true Russian"?
 - Why do you think this Russian poet includes a reference to Anne Frank? What is the connection?
 - Broaden the discussion by pointing out the following: Much of Holocaust literature was written after the fact because most prisoners did not have writing supplies during their actual imprisonment. Also, most Auschwitz prisoners spoke languages other than English and wrote in their native language. Thus the literature we do have is almost entirely read by Americans in translation. What impact do you think time and language have on a work's treatment and meaning?
- In the Follow-up Discussion (**Disc 2, Bonus Features, Title 7, 7:51**), Michael Berenbaum and Melvin Jules Bukiet discuss whether there are lessons to be learned from the Holocaust. What is your opinion and what do you base it on?
 - Professor Berenbaum urges young people to "Try not to be a perpetrator. Try not to be a bystander. Try not to be a victim." What does this mean to you in terms of your own life and behavior?