

Episode Guide: Orders & Initiatives

September 1941–March 1942

Jews from the Łódź ghetto board deportation trains for the Chelmno death camp.

Overview

"Orders and Initiatives" (**Disc 1, Title 2, 48:27**) highlights the crucial decision-making period of the Holocaust and reveals the secret plans of Adolf Hitler, Heinrich Himmler, and Reinhard Heydrich to annihilate the Jews. At a conference in January 1942, the Nazis plan how to achieve their goals. The first gas chambers are built at Auschwitz and the use of Zyklon B is developed. German doctors arrive to oversee each transport, deciding who should live and who should die.

In the program's Follow-up Discussion (**Disc 2, Bonus Features, Title 8, 7:18**), Linda Ellerbee interviews Claudia Koonz, professor of history at Duke University and author of *The Nazi Conscience* (Belknap, 2003), and Edward Kissi, professor of Africana studies at the University of South Florida and an expert on international relations and human rights.

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

Student Learning Goals

- Citing specific events and decisions, analyze how the Nazi mission changed from September 1941 to March 1942, explaining the reasons for the changes.
- Compare Auschwitz I and Auschwitz II (Birkenau) in terms of location, purpose, population, and living conditions.
- Identify the incremental steps the Nazis used to isolate Jews and deport them from their home environments to death camps, and the effects on Jews, their neighbors, and the Nazis at each stage.
- Summarize how and why many European nations collaborated with the Nazis, including their history of antisemitism.
- Examine the importance of professional ethics and the consequences for society when these codes of conduct are ignored.
- Delineate the process of dehumanization that is part of the prelude to genocide.
- Analyze one's responsibility to obey orders from authorities and differentiate between obedience and conformity.

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. **A Radical Initiative (Start: 00:00; Length: 8:37):** Between fall 1941 and spring 1942, the Nazis began to implement a policy of mass murder that touched every European nation. Officials at Auschwitz started planning a completely new camp about 1.5 miles north of Auschwitz I in a village the Germans called Birkenau. The camp was originally planned to hold 100,000 people. Conditions were designed to be appalling and a breeding ground for disease. People were jammed together in tiny spaces with no running water and no flooring. Of the first ten thousand Soviet prisoners of war housed at Birkenau, only a few hundred survived the first five months. Three prisoners who did survive—two Soviets and one Pole—talk about what it was like to live in an environment of constant death.
2. **Deportations (Start: 8:37; Length: 7:06):** Commandant Rudolf Höss's memoirs reveal that early in this period, Auschwitz still had no role in the mass murder of the Jews, which was being accomplished in other places by other means. In September 1941, for example, the Royal Air Force bombed Hamburg, Germany, for the first time, leaving hundreds homeless. The regional officer of Hamburg requested permission from Hitler to relocate the homeless to the East. In October, Hamburg Jews were told to report to a spot near the rail station in 24 hours. From Hamburg the Jews were sent by train to the Łódź Ghetto in Poland, one of many ghettos the Nazis had created previously to imprison Polish Jews, a group of people the Nazis considered even more dangerous than German Jews because of their Slavic background. Hamburg deportees Lucille Eichengreen and Jacob Zylberstein describe the overcrowded and filthy living conditions in Łódź. Soon, Nazi authorities sought ways of reducing the population. In the small town of Chelmno, the Nazis began constructing a facility to kill the Jews they deemed unproductive. Chelmno was one of a number of such killing camps.
3. **The Łódź Ghetto (Start: 22:56; Length: 5:25)** In ghettos like Łódź, Nazis tried to eliminate a proportion of Jews through work. Lucille Eichengreen and Jacob Zylberstein describe their lives in the ghetto, including the behavior of Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski, who, as chairman of the Jewish Council of Elders in Łódź, a position established by the Nazis to give local citizens some oversight of life in the ghetto, at times exploited his position of power.
4. **Auschwitz in 1942 (Start: 28:21; Length: 10:55):** During the spring of 1942, Auschwitz first began to play a central role in implementing the Final Solution. Höss had already been experimenting with the use of Zyklon B (prussic acid) to kill Soviet prisoners of war, as well as those inmates who were sick or disabled. Józef Paczynski, a surviving Polish political prisoner, describes what he witnessed. Now, for the first time, the Nazis began to deport Jews to Auschwitz from places other than Poland.

They came from the fiercely nationalistic country of Slovakia, which had only been created in 1938. Before the war, Slovakia had a Jewish community of 90,000. Because Slovakia and Germany were allies, the Nazis wanted 20,000 Slovak Jews to be deported as forced laborers, but they did not want to have to support their nonworking family members. The Slovaks were more than willing to deport the working Jews and agreed to pay the Nazis 500 *Reichsmarks* for each nonworker deported. The deportations to Auschwitz began in April 1942. Michal Kabác, a Slovakian Hlinka Guard, relates how the Hlinkas controlled the Jews once in a camp.

5. **The Little Red House (Start: 28:26; Length: 10:55):** Back at Auschwitz, the plans for Birkenau had changed. Soviet prisoners of war were now sent to factories elsewhere. And new gas chambers were built until Birkenau was the biggest graveyard in the world. As Slovakian Jews arrived by train, they first went through a selection process administered by the SS, in which men were separated from women, children, and the elderly. Those "selected" were sent immediately to the gas chambers and then buried in giant pits, often by other Jewish prisoners forced to do so by the Nazis. In his memoirs, Höss describes trying to maintain an atmosphere of calm during the selection process. In the coming months, Höss and his colleagues would create buildings where murder could be committed on a massive scale and begin to scour all of Europe for ever more people to bring here and kill.

6. **Follow-up Discussion (Disc 2, Bonus Features, Title 8, 7:18):** Professors Koonz and Kissi discuss the antecedents to genocide and what actions people can take to prevent it.

Learning Resources

Timeline: September 1941–March 1942

Biographies: Karl Bischoff, Walter Burmeister, **Lucille Eichengreen**, Fritz Ertl, Hans Frank, Reinhard Heydrich, Heinrich Himmler, Adolf Hitler, Rudolf Höss, **Michal Kabác**, Karl Kaufman, Herbert Lange, **Josef Mikusz**, **Józef Paczynski**, **Otto Pressburger**, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski, **Kazimierz Smolen**, **Pavel Stenkin**, Jozef Tiso, Vojtech Tuka, **Silvia Vesela**, **Eva Votavova**, Dieter Wisliceny, **Jacob Zylberstein**

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

Glossary: antisemitism, Auschwitz II (Birkenau), Belzec, Chelmno, Commando, concentration camp, Council of Elders, crematorium, deportation, extermination, Final Solution, Führer, gas chamber, gau, gestapo, ghetto, Hlinka Guard, Kapo, Little Red House, Little White House, Łódź, Lublin, mortuary, Nazi, Pearl Harbor, prussic acid, Reich, Reichsmark, Royal Air Force, scapegoat, selection, Slavic, SS, Wannsee Conference, World War I, Zyklon B

Readings:

- 2.1. "The Bureaucracy of Deportation."
- 2.2. "The Łódź Ghetto" (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum).
- 2.3. "The Diary of Johann Paul Kremer."
- 2.4. "Have You Ever...?" (Anti-Defamation League and the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation).

Before Viewing the Episode

It will help students to focus on the spread of Nazi ideology and territory if they can visualize Europe's geography. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Web site (www.ushmm.org) has excellent resources to help fulfill this objective. Begin with the section titled "Mapping the Holocaust," which is animated and provides an overview map of Europe in 1939. Scroll down the main page of this section to find the "European Rail System" entry and click on "See more maps" directly under it. In addition to the map of the "European Rail System," you will find maps of "Major Ghettos in Occupied Europe (1939-1941)" and "Extermination Camps in Poland, 1942," which are particularly relevant to this program. Additional maps can be found in the Maps and Plans section of this web site.

Post-Viewing Discussion

- Hundreds of thousands of people were moved around Central Europe during the Holocaust, mostly by train. Show students the map of the "European Rail System" and distribute **Reading 2.1. The Bureaucracy of Deportation**. Discuss how the existence of this system facilitated the Nazis' mission.
- When they knew very well what lay in store for the arrivals, why did leaders at Chelmno try to make the arrival station so attractive? Why did Höss try to keep everything calm during the selection process? How do bureaucracies help people feel less responsible for their actions?

- Ask: To what extent are the following people responsible for the Holocaust:
 - Railroad workers
 - Chemists who developed Zyklon B as an insecticide
 - Non-Jewish residents of cities and towns in which ghettos were located
 - A Slovakian Hlinka Guard
 - Hitler's direct subordinates (e.g., Heinrich Himmler, Reinhard Heydrich, etc.)
 - Lower echelon subordinates who either followed Hitler's orders or improvised on their own
 - Physicians who "supervised" the selection of those who would be killed at death camps
 - Soldiers who rounded up people for deportation
 - Neighbors of people who were rounded up for deportation
 - A young member of the Nazi Party

- Discuss: Should people always do as they are ordered? Should people refuse to obey orders when they feel they are morally wrong? What are alternative actions one can take under such circumstances? What are some consequences if people do—or do not do—as they are ordered? Professor Kissi has talked about "respecting authority but questioning information." Develop some scenarios that would illustrate this difference.

- In *First Person Singular*, Elie Wiesel, an Auschwitz survivor and Nobel Peace Prize recipient, has written, "I believe that anyone who lived through an experience is duty bound to bear witness to it." What does he mean by "duty bound"? What does he mean by "bearing witness"?

- This series differs from many accounts of the Holocaust in that it asks perpetrators as well as survivors to "bear witness." Why do you think someone like Michal Kabác would come forward to be interviewed for this program? What is your reaction to his justification of his behavior? What do you learn from him about how the Nazis gradually dehumanized both the victims and the perpetrators?

- Why do we usually hear more from survivors than from perpetrators? Who are you more likely to believe and why?

- Distribute and assign **Reading 2.2. The Łódź Ghetto**. Combine this descriptive background reading with a discussion of Lucille Eichengreen's testimony.

Discuss:

 - What do you learn about human behavior from Lucille's story and from the conditions people endured in the ghettos?
 - How do the descriptions in this reading compare to Lucille Eichengreen's testimony in the program?
 - How were the residents of the ghetto gradually stripped of their human dignity?
 - What motivates people to go to such lengths to destroy others?
 - The reading notes the deportation of five thousand Roma and Sinti (Gypsies) from Austria to Łódź. Gypsies were one of several populations targeted by the Nazis for extermination. Others were Jehovah's Witnesses, German homosexuals, and the disabled. The reasons these groups were chosen differed markedly, however, from the German world view that supported annihilating the Jews. Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, refused to salute Hitler, although a change in behavior could save them. German homosexuals did not reproduce so they did not add to the Aryan population. They could, however, choose to do so. Thus it was their behavior that targeted them, not who they were. A change in behavior would produce a change in status. Do the differences between biological and political or religious enemies matter if the victims are murdered? Why or why not?

- What sources of information do the producers of this program rely on? How reliable do you think these sources are? Why are these sources important? To extend this discussion, assign **Reading 2.3. The Diary of Johann Paul Kremer**, which reports on the first ten days in which this German doctor worked at Auschwitz. Extensive footnotes corroborate items in the diaries with what has been learned from other sources (you might have students alternate reading the diary with reading the footnotes). *Discuss:*
 - All physicians are taught, "First, do no harm." Do you think Kremer subscribed to this ethic? What do you think his choices actually were? How does one decide between loyalty to one's profession and loyalty to one's country?
 - What does it suggest about the situation and circumstances already in place at Auschwitz that in his September 2, 1942, entry, Kremer, upon seeing his first "action," writes, "By comparison, Dante's *Inferno* seems almost a comedy. Auschwitz is justly called an extermination camp!"

- Considering both the text and the footnotes, what kinds of sources are used to substantiate the events in Kremer's diary? How authentic do you think the information in his diary is? What factors contribute to your view?
- Pick any particular entry and rewrite it as Kremer might have if he knew the entry would be made public one day. Compare your entry to a classmate's.
- In the Follow-up Discussion (**Disc 2, Bonus Features, Title 8, 7:18**), Professor Kissi identifies a number of "warning signs" of genocide, including ethnic prejudice or other forms of hatred, fear, extreme forms of nationalism, radical and absurd ideas of social change, and myth-making, the desire on the part of the state to engage in extreme propaganda against the group that motivates large numbers of people to go and destroy that particular group. Many genocides occur, as well, in the context of war. To follow up on these ideas, have students research other genocides to see if these criteria apply, for example, Indonesia (1965–1966), East Timor (1975–1979), Bangladesh (1971), Burundi (1972), Cambodia (1975–1979), Rwanda (1994), Bosnia-Herzegovina (early 1990s), and Sudan (2004–). In presenting their case studies, students should consider questions like these: What role does fear (national, personal, group) play in the development of a genocide? What steps do charismatic leaders take to convince otherwise intelligent, moral people to persecute a small part of their population?
- To help students understand their own responsibilities for their behavior, distribute **Reading 2.4. Have You Ever...?**, which is a handout developed by the Anti-Defamation League and the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation to encourage students to think about their own behavior. The handout tells students that their answers are private, but student responses can be discussed in a more general way.