The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933-1945, Volume I

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PREFACE

More than six decades have passed since the end of World War II. Over the years, a formidable body of scholarship has been created to help us understand the nature of the Nazi regime, Germany under Nazi rule and Europe under German hegemony; and the scope and implications of the Holocaust.

The Holocaust—broadly defined as the state-sponsored systematic persecution and attempted annihilation of European Jewry between 1933 and 1945—became the defining event of the twentieth century and remains the greatest single crime of any century. Six million Jews were murdered by Germany and its allies in a continent-wide rampage that extended from France, Belgium, and the Netherlands in the west to Poland and the outer reaches of Axis expansion into the USSR in the east; from Norway and the Baltic states in the north to Romania, Yugoslavia, and Greece in the south; and even to the North African colonies under the control of the French collaborationist regime at Vichy as well as those territories under direct German military occupation. Simultaneously with the victimization of the Jews, the perpetrators directed their fury against other groups whom they targeted because of their ethnicity, race, and religion—Poles, Sinti and Roma, people with disabilities, Jehovah’s Witnesses, homosexuals, and others. This experience—this history—remains profoundly significant in the post-Holocaust era, as we confront a new century marred by recurrent genocide and crimes against humanity, intolerance, and violation of fundamental human rights.

Through the efforts of a first generation of Holocaust scholars, who themselves eyewitnessed the events, and of their immediate successors, who had substantial opportunity for direct contact with survivors and eyewitnesses, we gained considerable insight into some components of the universe of camps and ghettos through which the perpetrators organized and committed many of their crimes, and in which many of the victims either perished or suffered in ways that are often impossible for us to imagine. Many aspects of the network of camps and ghettos, however, have remained unexplained and unexplored. There has never been a comprehensive listing of camps and ghettos, or a reference work focused on the entirety of the system. Thus there has been no way for interested readers and researchers to obtain reliable information about particular sites or the primary and secondary source materials pertaining to them and to the network as a whole.

Any number of fundamental questions has thus long remained unanswered. How many camps and ghettos existed? Who ran them? Who were their victims? How long were various camps and ghettos in operation, and for what specific purposes? Who profited from them? Where can one consult archival and other research resources regarding a particular camp or ghetto? The answers to these questions have been mostly anecdotal and scattered, when they have been available at all. This encyclopedia attempts to help close the gaps in our knowledge and offer assistance to those who would like to probe more deeply into some aspect of the universe of Holocaust-era camps and ghettos more thoroughly.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum undertook this project recognizing that it had a unique obligation to provide reliable and up-to-date reference works for the study of the Holocaust, especially while eyewitnesses and survivors were still present to provide critical guidance and review. As work progressed, we have benefited not only from their involvement and that of the Academic Committee of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council, but also from massive amounts of archival material that only recently became available. An avalanche of rich new archival material relating to the Holocaust has become accessible over the past decade, as a result of the fall of communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the former USSR; the expiration of fifty-year archival restrictions in many other countries; and the opening of the archives of the International Tracing Service in Bad Arolsen, Germany. In fact, the Museum led the international effort to open the Bad Arolsen archives in part with the production of this encyclopedia in mind. Our goal has been to produce a work that will be useful both for members of the general public and for scholars wishing to pursue further research. The researchers and editors of the Museum’s Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies—with the assistance of hundreds of researchers around the world—have labored to answer fundamental questions about each site as completely as possible and to provide information on sources for additional research.

The resulting work, the first volume of which you have before you, has revealed the sheer scale of the system of perpetration constructed by the Nazis and their allies—well over twenty thousand camps and ghettos of various sorts identified thus far. This volume alone describes over one thousand camps, the
vast majority of which were unfamiliar to any but a small circle of specialists when this project began. Future volumes will address thousands more. The evil, misery, and grief that existed in those places is impossible to quantify—perhaps impossible to grasp—but also impossible to deny. Here was a central pillar of the system of perpetration: the willingness and ability to incarcerate, enslave, torture, and kill in the name of assumed racial, cultural, and social superiority. The universe of camps and ghettos epitomized the exercise of raw power against a society’s supposed enemies, the manifestation of unadulterated hatred, fear, and cruelty, which many embraced wholeheartedly and many more witnessed and tolerated.

As part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum’s mission to inform the public about the Holocaust and to enhance future scholarship and teaching regarding the Holocaust, we are proud to present this milestone contribution to Holocaust research, with the expectation that it will inform and guide its users for years to come.

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