At face value, Operation Reinhard and the Auschwitz concentration camp system appear somewhat similar, the main common denominator being the goal of killing massive numbers of human beings. Having said that, a closer look reveals each was governed by different, discrete policy objectives: Operation Reinhard’s policy was to kill all the “useless mouths” in the Polish ghettos while Auschwitz focused on extermination through work. Even so, as this chapter will show, Auschwitz moved toward its objective using the same mechanism as Operation Reinhard and, later, Milgram did—the application of intuition, past experience, and close observation of the pilot-testing process (all of which advanced efficiency, predictability, calculability, and control, along with a greater dependence on non-human technologies). With a more pronounced emphasis on industrialization, Auschwitz achieved its most significant “advancement”—the one that distinguished it most from other solutions to the “Jewish problem”—in the matter of the most powerful strain resolving mechanism of all—the means of inflicting harm.

Killing on an industrial scale distinguished Auschwitz in three main ways: efficiency, profitability, and (from the Nazi perspective) “humaneness.” The Nazis, it seems, regarded the Auschwitz process as the most humane solution to the “Jewish problem” in two main ways. First, for the most directly involved perpetrators, Auschwitz was a relatively stress-free, and with the camp’s high standard of living, pleasant place to work. Second, Auschwitz developed a standard operating procedure that the Nazis in and beyond the camp—including the German public cognizant
of the extermination campaign—perceived as a gentle, even kind, way of killing other human beings on an unprecedented scale. Although it was neither of these, the process’s designation as “most humane” seems to have eased many of the reservations that Nazi functionaries might have otherwise felt.

As this chapter will show, the general perception that Auschwitz offered the most humane solution to the Jewish problem was particularly dangerous, because in all likelihood it extended the life cycle of the efficient and profitable policy of extermination by work. That is, the mutually inclusive combination of advanced formal rationality and what, for the most directly involved perpetrators, was a less stressful killing process translated into an efficient body-consuming machine that, if not for the Soviets, would have probably known no end. The easier and less the stressful killing became, the more victims the leadership in Berlin found in need of extermination. What follows explains how the most efficient and profitable killing process developed during the Holocaust, and why many Nazis perceived it as humane.

**Humble Beginnings**

As Soviet military strength grew after the winter of 1941, Himmler’s plans to fill Auschwitz with Russian POWs naturally faltered. Thus, he turned to a less desirable source of slave labor—Jews. But the first group to arrive at Auschwitz I around this time was incapable of productive labor: 400 mainly elderly people sent from an Upper Silesian labor camp to be killed. In mid-February 1942, these Jews were gassed in Crematorium I. Their death screams could be heard throughout the main camp, and German staff raised concerns that—despite a few attempts to dampen these noises—gassing victims here probably lacked necessary “privacy…” Therefore, as more Jews incapable of work arrived at Auschwitz I, more were transferred to the nearby Birkenau satellite camp. On 27 February 1942, Hans Kammler, the head of the construction division of the SS Main Economic and Administrative Department, decided that it made more sense for the industrial-style crematorium—Crematorium II—which, Bischoff and Prüfer originally planned for Auschwitz I, instead be built at the more secluded Birkenau site. Soon after this decision, on 20 March 1942 (just as Operation Reinhard started), a stone cottage on the new satellite camp was hastily converted into a gas chamber to deal with the ongoing influx of
non-workers to Birkenau. The 60–80 square meter cottage called Bunker I proved capable of killing about 500 victims per gassing. As in the early stages of Operation Reinhard, Jewish work commandos dumped the victims’ bodies into large nearby pits. According to Camp Commandant Höss, “Whereas in the spring of 1942 only small operations were involved, the number of convoys increased during the summer…” To keep up with the bureaucratic momentum that supplied increasing numbers of victims and to avoid bottlenecks, Höss felt, “we had to create new extermination facilities” of course, he did not have to do this; as a problem-solving bureaucratic functionary, he chose to do it. In June 1942, Birkenau’s gassing capacity increased when Bunker II, another stone cottage, was converted into a gas chamber. Measuring about 105 square meters, Bunker II was larger than Bunker I and capable of killing about 800 people per gassing. The victims’ bodies were also dumped in nearby pits.

On 17 and 18 July 1942, Himmler visited Auschwitz for the second time. During this visit, he personally observed Bunker II in action. The gassing operation he saw included mostly young and old Jews. According to Höss, Himmler “made no remark regarding the process of extermination, but remained quite silent.” Himmler’s reaction in this case stands in stark contrast to his earlier response to the mass shooting of mostly men in Minsk, which had caused his face to turn “white as cheese…” With the removal of the distasteful visual spectacle, Himmler was no longer disturbed by the massacre of civilians.

During this visit, Himmler informed Höss, who after the war acquired a reputation for being unusually frank, “Eichmann’s [train transport] program will continue…and will be accelerated every month from now on.” Himmler then instructed Höss to increase Birkenau’s population capacity from 100,000 to 200,000. Himmler’s intention was to bolster the Nazi war machine by building a regional armaments industry that would draw upon Birkenau’s slave labor force. But, because many of those bound for Auschwitz were incapable of productive labor, Himmler also apparently instructed Höss to exterminate those Jews incapable of work. Because Himmler had just seen Bunker II in action, he knew that killing large numbers of non-workers as they arrived in Auschwitz would pose no problem for Höss, who had, as Lasik put it, the requisite “organizational talents.” But the SS-Reichsführer did raise concerns about the adjacent pits full of rotting bodies. Again, just in case Germany lost the war, Himmler deemed it wise to eliminate any evidence
of Nazi war crimes. Doing so would also address the local authority’s concerns that the 107,000 bodies buried in the pits were polluting the groundwater.22

Himmler’s solution to the body disposal problem was two-fold. First, as a shorter-term measure, in September 1942 Paul Blobel’s Kommando 1005 was sent to Auschwitz to apply the best outdoor body-burning techniques they had discovered that summer.23 Second, and as a longer-term solution, Höss would expedite Topf & Sons’ construction of Birkenau’s industrial crematorium (Crematorium II). Himmler’s concern re-emphasized the central problem also encountered in the Operation Reinhard camps: Killing was generally easier than body disposal.24 But he clearly sensed that Birkenau held the potential to overcome such problems, which perhaps explains why during his visit he requested that Birkenau be doubled in size and Höss promoted to Lieutenant Colonel.25

The SS-Reichsführer’s demand to expand Birkenau’s capacity to 200,000 must have sent camp official Karl Bischoff into a spin. The increased death rate that would come with doubling the camp’s size would mean even more bodies in need of cremation. To eliminate any risk of bottlenecks, on 19 August Bischoff ordered another Topf & Sons’ industrial crematorium.26 This crematorium—Crematorium III—located opposite Crematorium II was to be a mirror image of its predecessor. See, for example, the following Allied forces aerial photograph taken in 1944 of both crematoria: https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/photo/aerial-photograph-showing-gas-chambers-and-crematoria-at-the-auschwitz-birkenau.

Out of a fear that these new facilities might still fail to handle the anticipated number of bodies, plans were made to build several other smaller facilities: Crematoriums IV, V, and VI (never built). Although the plans for Crematoriums IV and V included their own gas chambers, they were to be constructed next to Bunkers II and I (respectively) so that, if needed, the newer facilities could be co-opted to cremate the victims from these older gassing facilities.27

With all this construction likely to take some time, the bodies of victims gassed in the meantime were burned using Blobel’s open-fire techniques in massive pits adjacent to Bunkers I and II. This short-term solution, however, generated a problem of its own, exposing the camp and local community to the pungent smell of burning flesh.28 The elevated smoke-stacks of the industrial crematoria would somewhat eliminate this problem, which provided another incentive to expedite their construction.
A few months later, in September 1942, Himmler’s order to double the capacity of Birkenau to 200,000 prisoners was scaled back to 140,000 when Armaments Minister Albert Speer convinced Hitler of Himmler’s probable incompetence in the area of arms production. Despite this setback to Himmler’s ambitions, the construction plans for Crematoria II to V remained unchanged and preceded with haste.

With the onset of the 1942–1943 winter, the operators of Bunkers I and II encountered an unanticipated problem. The cold weather made it difficult to raise the room temperature in the gas chambers above the requisite 25.7 degrees Celsius that enabled the vaporization of Zyklon-B pellets. To avoid this problem in the future, the plans for Crematorium II were changed: Its more insulated basement-level morgues were converted into massive underground gas chambers. Doing so simply required replacing the morgues’ body chutes with a staircase, which victims would descend. The final plan had the larger of Crematorium II’s two morgues serving as an undressing room and the smaller as a massive, partially underground gas chamber. This decision was made easier by the fact that the morgue (now gas chamber) already came with a powerful odor-expelling ventilation system. It will be recalled that the earlier conversion of Crematorium I’s morgue into a gas chamber (around late 1941) had highlighted this technology’s usefulness for expelling poisonous gas. A minor setback of the new plan was that architect Walter Dejaco’s blueprints, produced on 19 December, arrived too late and the concrete for the chutes had already been laid and therefore required demolition. By 29 January, Bischoff and his team stopped referring to the smaller of Crematorium II and started terming it a “gassing cellar [Vergaungskeller].” Because the gas chamber was so big and any gas within it could be extracted so quickly (and replaced with fresh air), the application of this ad hoc decision to both Crematoriums II and III increased Auschwitz-Birkenau’s killing/body disposal capacity enormously.

In early March of 1943, Crematorium II was ready to undergo a series of tests, the biggest of which occurred around the middle of the month when 1492 women, children, and elderly Jews were gassed and then cremated. Incineration of these bodies took more than a day, thus highlighting the inaccuracy of Prüfer’s initial calculation: It had failed to incinerate 1440 bodies in 24 hours. After some minor adjustments, the facility’s maximum incineration capacity reached 750 bodies in 24 hours, and on 31 March, Crematorium II was ready for use. Death and incineration in Crematorium II basically involved a six-step process. Step One: Victims lined up outside the extermination center...
then descended the stairs into the morgue converted into an undressing chamber. Step Two: victims undressed. Step Three: The naked victims entered another slightly smaller chamber—the second partially underground morgue recently converted into a gas chamber—termed the “showers.” Step Four: German “disinfectors” would climb on top of the gas chamber and pour Zyklon-B crystals through sealable ceiling vents with the victims then dying below. Step Five: When the victims had died, the gas fumes would be extracted and the Jewish work commando, on entering the chamber, would strip the bodies of all valuables. Step Six: the Jewish work commando would transfer the bodies to the adjacent crematoria (one level above) to be incinerated. The following video clip provides a basic overview of this process: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q75pOXBr4e0. For a virtual reality walk-through of Crematorium II, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x3EcTFTyr5E.

A week before Crematorium II’s test-run, on 22 March 1943, Crematorium IV was completed. However, by May this facility had been permanently decommissioned because of a major structural defect that only worsened with time. The completion of Crematorium II was followed by Crematorium V and then III on 4 April and 24 June 1943, respectively. Thus, as Operation Reinhard wound down, Auschwitz-Birkenau’s role in the Final Solution ramped up.

By the first half of 1943, however, as all this construction came to an end, the tide of the war turned rather decisively in the Soviet’s favor. In February 1943, the Wehrmacht was defeated in the Battle of Stalingrad. Then in August, it was defeated again in the Battle of Kursk, its final offensive attack on Soviet territory. The Nazi war machine never recovered from these blows, and thereafter, all Germans knew that the Russians were coming. However, earlier, during the “euphoria of victory,” Germany had been persuaded into willingly or indifferently supporting their government’s pursuit of a variety of horrific war crimes. And many of these crimes involved Soviet victims, a nation that in light of its enormous loses could in victory hardly be expected to act with benevolence. Having allowed the undertaking of such dark deeds, Germany probably wouldn’t be able to act with impunity after all. Suddenly, the folly, selfishness, and greed of it all became apparent. Germany collectively started to contemplate its fate. Many Germans no doubt considered assassinating Hitler and then blaming it all on the machinations of a hypnotic madman. Indeed, during 1943, there was a
rapid increase in assassination attempts on Hitler. In desperation, perhaps Germany could negotiate a permanent truce. But it was too late for all that. As Hitler reminded his inner circle: “Gentlemen, the bridges behind us are broken.”

As a nation had arguably long passed the Obedience study’s persuasion phase (the first part of the experiment where participants were convinced into inflicting the intensifying shocks) and, having supported wrongdoing, by 1943 was deep inside the experiment’s after-capitulation phase (the point after participants commit themselves to completing). “[T]hat is good”, Goebbels noted in his diary on March of the same year, because “a Volk that have burned their bridges fight much more unconditionally than those who still have the chance of retreat.”

All that Germany could do was fight on to the bitter end, thereby delaying the inevitable.

But fight is not all that they did. A document from the German Postal Censor’s Office in Ukraine, which surveilled all private correspondence, warned that the Nazi perk for Germans stationed in the east to purchase then post-cheap local goods back home had spiraled out of control. This undated report, probably written soon after the defeat at Stalingrad, elaborates on “the only thing about Ukraine that interests the majority of the authors”—black marketeering:

The illegal trade is not just aimed at acquiring personal family necessities. It is becoming a “business,” carried out on a commercial basis. People are investing and earning money. The letters promise that money grows on trees in Ukraine and that people can get rich there quickly. “Here, you can become a rich woman overnight.” Ordinary people are in a position to write home that they have already “earned” thousands. Others want to convert profits made in Ukraine into cars and property in the Reich. In nouveau rich fashion, jewels and expensive furs are purchased for housewives. […] All of this supports the harsh conclusion that is often drawn in the letters: Ukraine is a black market paradise.

The report ends in a statement that supports Heinrich Böll’s earlier observation that Germans’ stockpiling of goods in the occupied territories reminded him of robbing a corpse: “People often refer to Germans working in business and civilian administration in Ukraine as ‘East hyenas.'” Instead of black market trading, other Germans preferred the more direct “shopping with a pistol…” For example, in Lithuania, the company commander of Police Battalion 105 spent “a day and night”
packing “crates of loot” to send back home to Bremen. Many saw stealing as a well-deserved perk in exchange for having undertaking their emotionally taxing genocidal tasks. And anyway, so these men no doubt told themselves, if they didn’t keep the stolen goods, someone probably “less deserving” than themselves would. Such rampant corruption was common in the East because the risk of the Nazi authorities prosecuting them was slim—an inherently criminal regime was not in the strongest position to accuse others of criminality. Consequently, many ordinary Germans sensed they could engage in such personally beneficial acts with total impunity.

This kind of corruption spread to much of the civilian population back home in Germany. As Jews from all over Western and Central Europe were increasingly rounded up and sent to places like Auschwitz-Birkenau, the Nazis confiscated millions of cubic meters of their household effects and then redistributed them to German bombing raid victims, young newlyweds, large families, and war widows. Occasionally, the recipients were distinguished members of the SS and military. In the heavily bombed working-class districts of Hamburg, for example, librarian Gertrud Seydelmann recollected:

> Ordinary housewives suddenly wore fur coats, traded coffee, and jewelry, and had imported antique furniture and rugs from Holland and France. ... Some of our regular readers were always telling me to go down to the harbor if I wanted to get hold of rugs, carpets, furniture, jewelry, and furs. It was property stolen from Dutch Jews who, as I learned after the war, had been taken away to the death camps. I wanted nothing to do with this. But in refusing, I had to be careful around those greedy people, especially the women, who were busily enriching themselves. I couldn’t let my true feelings show.

These housewives never killed any Jews, and as aerial bombardment of German housing increased in the last few years of the war, their emotional universes were all consumed by their victimization. And anyway, so these housewives likely told themselves, if they refused to capitalize on this influx of property, (again) some other less deserving German than themselves no doubt would. After such rationalizations sufficiently disarmed their guilty conscience, a competition of who among them could successfully acquire the most prized possessions of a murdered people ensued.
Back at Auschwitz-Birkenau, from mid-1943, the camp’s multiple gas chambers and crematoria facilities, managed by the organizational talents of Eichmann and Höss, were capable of efficiently killing and hygienically disposing of more human beings than any of the Operation Reinhard camps. All that was needed was an opportunity to prove it. That opportunity came on 19 March 1944 when the German armed forces invaded Hungary, which the Nazis (correctly) suspected was about to desert the Axis alliance in favor of the allies. Germany’s successful invasion of Hungary occurred as elsewhere the Nazis were losing enormous tracts of land. Germany might lose the war, but there was still an opportunity for Hitler to win his personal battle with the European Jews. With hegemony over Hungary and the loaded gun of Auschwitz-Birkenau, the Nazi leadership decided to exterminate the Hungarian Jews.

Although several months before the Hungarian invasion Höss had left Auschwitz for a higher administrative position in Berlin, he returned to his old job to do what he did best. As Hilberg puts it, “Hungary was going to lift Auschwitz to the top.” To have any chance of achieving “Aktion Höss,” the energetic commandant needed to act with celebrity and unprecedented levels of efficiency. He had a three-track railway siding laid inside the Birkenau complex—an innovation that enabled three trains to enter the camp perimeter at any one time. From mid-May 1944, Höss expected from Eichmann an average delivery of about 12–14,000 Hungarian Jews a day. Because most of the arrivals were young and old, only about 10–30% were selected as workers. The rest were sent on-foot to Crematoria II, III, and V, while smaller groups were gassed in Bunker II, which had been re-commissioned for the special action.

However, it soon became apparent that Auschwitz-Birkenau’s maximum incineration capacity could not keep up with such a massive and continuous influx of victims. The inventive Höss therefore devised a combination of old and new techniques. These included the construction of several massive outdoor incineration pits, the biggest of which measured around 45 m long by 8 m wide and 2 m deep. There about 5000 bodies a day could be incinerated. Another technique Höss deployed included over-filling the industrial crematoria and then having a Jewish work detail use hammers to crush the partially incinerated bodies into ash. This solution came with the attendant risk of damaging the crematoria. Nonetheless, both strategies greatly increased Birkenau’s
maximum incineration capacity to around 8000 \(^{60}\) or even 10,000 bodies per day.\(^{61}\) Therefore, after the selections of workers from non-workers, Auschwitz-Birkenau could keep up with the daily influx of around 12–14,000 Jews.

Reflecting on Höss’ “assembly-line operation,”\(^{62}\) camp worker SS-Unterscharführer Pery Broad recalled, “There was never a break. Hardly had the last corpse been dragged out of the chamber to the cremation ditch in the corpse-covered yard behind the crematorium, than the next batch was already undressing.”\(^{63}\) This blitzkrieg against the Hungarian Jews—which took place across a seven-week period between 15 May and 9 July 1944—ended in the deportation of nearly 440,000 people to Auschwitz-Birkenau, most of whom were gassed on arrival.\(^{64}\) According to van Pelt and Dwork, “At no other time was Auschwitz more efficient as a killing center.”\(^{65}\) Indeed, Höss, with the constant flow of Eichmann’s trains, had taken Auschwitz-Birkenau to the top. But because the camp reached its full body-consuming stride so late into the war, it ended up killing “only” between 1,100,000 and 1,500,000 civilians.\(^{66}\) Although Auschwitz never got to demonstrate its long-term destructive potential, it still became what Hilberg termed “the largest death center the world had ever seen.”\(^{67}\) In light of the rapid decimation of the Hungarian Jews, one can only imagine the number of people the Nazi regime would have killed had Auschwitz-Birkenau remained open for just a few more years. Hayes actually estimates that had the war continued and the Nazis were able to round up and transport the remaining European Jews to Auschwitz-Birkenau, all could have been killed and their bodies cremated by the end of 1946.\(^{68}\)

**Auschwitz-Birkenau: Formal Rationality and the Most Efficient Means to the End**

In terms of the four main components of formal rationality—efficiency, predictability, control, and calculability—Auschwitz-Birkenau took resolving the Jewish question to a new and even higher level. Trains from all over Europe packed with several thousand Jews each entered a heavily guarded, electrified, and basically inescapable camp perimeter. With the selection of non-workers from workers complete, efficiency required the key ingredient of victim docility, as had been the case during Operation Reinhard. Once again, the T4’s usual tricks appeared. “Very politely, very amiably, a little speech was made to [those selected for immediate
death],” noted French physician André Lettich. A German would tell them, “You’ve arrived after a trip; you’re dirty; you’re going to have a bath. Undress quickly!” To further bolster the pretext, on some occasions Lettich claims, “towels and soap were distributed.”69 If the process moved too slowly, German camp workers might capitalize on the fact that the victims were likely thirsty after having endured a three- to four-day train journey. They might promise a drink of water or coffee, but only after the new arrivals had taken a delousing shower. This offer, which the Jews frequently applauded, helped ensure a calm, smooth, and continuous flow of bodies through the system.70

By offering the strongest prisoners a chance for survival in exchange for their labor, the camp guards also managed to diffuse the most threatening source of Jewish resistance. Those selected as workers had an identification number tattooed on the inside of their wrist to track their movements within and beyond the camp, and their gradual demise from living to dead. The promise of false hope helped to motivate the slowly starving Jews to work hard: Auschwitz I’s camp gate (mis)informed all that “Arbeit Macht Frei”—“Work will set you free.” Prisoners not only worked hard for free but also did so in return for barely any food. When their productivity dropped below a certain level or they were deemed surplus to requirements, like their unproductive relatives before them, they too were sent to the gas chambers. Even if these workers eventually realized their fate, there was no time left to organize a revolt and they were often too weak to resist anyway. After these workers had been killed, they were replaced by healthier new arrivals. Trapped within the highly secure and largely inescapable enclosure, these new slaves typically shared the same fate as those before them.71

Alice Lok Cahana’s account of the gassing process at Auschwitz-Birkenau (which was essentially the same for both non-workers and worn-out workers) illustrates more of the Nazis’ tricks of deception. On 7 October 1944, Cahana and her sister were selected to go to a new barrack but on the way they were instructed to first take a shower for hygiene purposes. They were sent to “a nice building with flowers at the windows.”

I see flowers in a window—reminding you of home. Reminding you that mother went out when the Germans came into Hungary, and instead of being scared or crying or hysterical she went to the market and bought violets. And it made me so calm. If Mother buys flowers it can’t be so bad. They will not hurt us.72
With the flowers having set Cahana’s worst fears at ease, she willingly entered the changing room where “an SS woman said, ‘Everyone put their shoes nicely together, your clothes on the floor.’” But were they really about to take a shower? More props suggested so. “The ‘changing rooms’, the anterooms to the gas chambers [were]...overt stage sets, with their numbered pegs for clothing (‘Remember your number!’) and the signs in various languages advertising the benefits of hygiene.” Next, Cahana notes, “we were taken into a room—naked.” After entering, a solid door quickly closed behind them. Before they could establish what was happening, the door suddenly swung open and they were quickly ushered out of the so-called showers. Cahana and those with her had, by the narrowest of margins, avoided certain death because the Jewish work detail had staged a revolt.

Had there not been a revolt, a van with the markings of the Red Cross would have pulled up outside. The van’s markings were, according to Auschwitz bookkeeper Oskar Gröning, designed to “create the impression” to all those who could see from near and far that, in line with the pretense, this facility was indeed a delousing station—“people had nothing to fear.” A couple of Germans would exit the van and, donning gas masks, climb on top of the semi-underground gas chamber. The two “disinfecting operators,” as they were euphemistically termed, would then await a signal from a higher authority figure (sometimes a medical doctor) to pour carefully measured quantities of Zyklon-B crystals into the roof vents. Then, the two operators would close and seal the lids behind them, return to their van, and drive off. And because they drove off, they remained perceptually oblivious to the pandemonium and terror left in their wake. It took about 10–12 minutes to kill all the victims, upon which the industrial-strength air vents would expeditiously remove the gas from the chamber. Next, the Jewish Sonderkommando entered the chamber and stripped the two, perhaps two and a half, thousand or so, victims of anything valuable—hair, hidden items, gold teeth. The stripping process took about four hours. The bodies were then dragged into the adjacent lift and transferred to one of the crematoria where they were incinerated. The German overseers or even their Eastern European collaborators need not engage in any of this horrific labor. In an action, reminiscent of Milgram’s processing blocks (one hour per participant), Clendinnen notes about Auschwitz-Birkenau’s highly rationalized system, “When the episode was over and the rooms emptied, there would be a frantic rush to remove all traces of
the last audience and to reset the scene for the next intake and the next performance. A single performance at Auschwitz—the start-to-finish conversion of a single convoy into ash—took on average 72 hours.

Because many workers required close supervision over fairly long periods of time, Auschwitz’s system of “extermination through work” was dependent on far more (relatively expensive) German guards than the Operation Reinhard camps—2500 on average. Having said this, like Operation Reinhard but so different from the mass shootings, few Germans were required to run Auschwitz’s extermination facilities. With a large Jewish slave labor workforce and Jewish kapo enforcers, as Rees says of Auschwitz’s Crematoria II and III,

The whole horrific operation was often supervised by as few as two SS men. Even when the killing process was stretched to the limit there were only ever a handful of SS members around. This, of course, limited to a minimum the number of Germans who might be subjected to the kind of psychological damage that members of the killing squads in the East had suffered.

Auschwitz-Birkenau, like Operation Reinhard, could kill a set maximum number of victims per day, thus enabling the calculation of monthly or even yearly genocidal mortality rates. As a result, predicting how long it would take to “disappear” Europe’s entire population of Jews became technically possible. Indeed, in terms of calculability and predictability, Auschwitz exceeded Operation Reinhard for two main reasons. First, Auschwitz’s indoor crematoria ensured that unpredictable rainy weather did not reduce the camp’s normal body-burning capacity. Second, the diesel motors used in Operation Reinhard frequently broke down, regularly causing major bottlenecks in the system. At Auschwitz, Zyklon-B posed no such risk because packing humans into a hermetically sealed and insulated chamber reliably and predictably saw the room temperature rise over the requisite 25.7 degrees Celsius.

Auschwitz had another advantage. Although all prisoners who entered were, as in Operation Reinhard and the mass shootings, robbed of all their valuables, over the long term the system of “extermination through work” was a potentially more profitable form of extortion. To feed, clothe, and lodge a worker in Auschwitz cost 1.34 Reichsmarks per day, but to hire the least skilled laborers, the Nazis charged employers 3–4 Reichsmarks. Between 1940 and 1945, the Nazi state earned 60
million Reichsmarks from Auschwitz’s slave labor system. The longer the Auschwitz stayed open, the more profit the Nazis could accrue. Operation Reinhard and the mass shootings, however, could—for obvious reasons—only generate high profits over the short term. Quite simply the system at Auschwitz became the Nazi regime’s model solution to its European-wide Jewish question because of its efficiency and longer-term profitability.

In 2001, I visited Auschwitz during a backpacking tour across Eastern Europe. Afterward, I, like most visitors, was left wondering what kind of cold, calculated, and cunning person could envisage, design, and then build such a monstrous factory of death. But the answer that has emerged from my subsequent research sees this singular monstrous person disappear into the collective mass. Instead, I found numerous perpetrators who independently and together suggested and tested a wide variety of potential “improvements.” The ideas that proved most effective—for example, to utilize Eastern European collaborators and Jewish labor for the most difficult positions, to install air ventilation systems in a morgue, to use faster-acting Zyklon-B gas, to construct a contiguous gas chamber and crematorium, to convert Crematorium II’s basement-level morgues into an undressing room and gas chamber, and finally to increase the scale of everything—were retained. And all the ideas that, with time, proved ineffective were dropped. Eventually, the most effective means accumulated until an ugly beast emerged—one increasingly capable of converting the preconceived goal discussed at Wannsee into a reality.

Auschwitz-Birkenau stood at the end of a long journey of ad hoc experimentation that chipped away at the numerous and varied problems associated with exterminating millions of unwanted civilians. The invention of Auschwitz cannot be attributed to any one person. The resulting responsibility ambiguity at every link in the organizational chain only made it psychologically easier for all involved to play a part in the perpetrator collective that, “only in small ways,” contributed to the camp’s invention. And it was Auschwitz’s disjointed invention that probably explains why, after the war, perpetrators could not pinpoint who exactly invented the ghoulish yet undeniably clever process of extermination. For the perpetrators—but also for victims, survivors, and postwar observers—the end result that was Auschwitz-Birkenau became an incomprehensible enigma beyond rational explanation.
But, it is here that a centrally important Milgram-Holocaust linkage is found. Consider, for example, Milgram’s discovery that substituting a translucent screen separating the participant from learner with a solid partition could greatly increase the completion rate—an idea actually stimulated from the bottom-up by his participants’ avoidance behavior. Milgram did not know why exactly this small innovation increased the completion rate, he just knew it did. And when discoveries like this moved him closer to his preconceived goal, he retained them. Over time, these kinds of innovations accumulated until a “devilishly ingenious” procedure emerged and he achieved his goal—maximization of the baseline completion rate. And afterward, Milgram, the main but not only inventive force behind the Obedience experiments, could not explain the disturbing results he had obtained.

**CONCLUSION**

Auschwitz was the terminus of the “twisted road” to the Holocaust. It represents the Nazis’ most preferred solution to their self-defined “Jewish problem.” As in Operation Reinhard, staff at Auschwitz collectively found ways to extend a little more all four components of a formally rational organizational system—greater efficiency, predictability, calculability, and control. Just some of the key ideas that advanced formal rationality included the use of tracking tattoos, industrial-sized, weatherproof, indoor crematoria, a gas dependent on body heat, new tricks of deception, and railway tracks of sufficient capacity. Auschwitz’s innovations saw the killing and cremation of humans on a greater scale and in a shorter amount of time than any earlier system they had developed. On top of all this, the program of extermination through work was less wasteful (of slave labor), and therefore, the system overall was far more profitable than Operation Reinhard. As Bauman argues:

> Considered as a complex purposeful operation, the Holocaust may serve as a paradigm of modern bureaucratic rationality. Almost everything was done to achieve maximum results with minimum costs and efforts. Almost everything (within the realm of the possible) was done to deploy the skills and resources of everybody involved, including those who were to become the victims of the successful operation. Almost all pressures irrelevant or adversary to the purpose of the operation were neutralized or put out of action altogether. Indeed, the story of the organization of the Holocaust could be made into a textbook of scientific management.91
Without a doubt, there were many examples of great inefficiency during the Holocaust—for one, the Nazi management system with its overlapping jurisdictions stimulated the duplication of tasks as different factions independently vied to resolve whatever it was they thought the Führer wished. Having said this, it was still a management system that went on to produce more efficient winners and less efficient losers. Once the process took its course, the leadership was able to pick and choose from a range of options the best available solution to any one problem. And from this perspective, Höss’ Auschwitz was the winner among a wide range of competitors. In terms of developing the most rational solution to a seemingly intractable problem—in conjunction with business acumen and entrepreneurial capitalism where the pursuit of profit was taken to its unregulated natural extreme—nothing competes with Auschwitz.

However, as the next chapter will show, the clear presence in Auschwitz of an ever-advancing form of Weberian formal rationality provides an incomplete picture. The extermination machine had to be as efficient and profitable as possible, but it also had to ensure that those Germans most directly involved could avoid experiencing any “burdening of the soul”—any feelings of shame, guilt, or (most commonly) repugnance that killing civilians could stimulate. The Germans most directly involved had to be able to avoid the conclusion that they had become mass executioners of defenseless men, women, children, and babies. The killing process at Auschwitz extended previous boundaries of formal rationality and did so in a way that German perpetrators in and beyond the camps were able to call “humane.”

Notes

1. See Mommsen (1986, p. 126).
2. Longerich (2012, p. 557).
3. van Pelt and Dwork (1996, p. 301).
4. Lasik (1998, p. 293).
5. An attempt was made to surround three of the gas chamber’s external walls with steep embankments of dirt and another to drown out the victims’ cries by revving a truck’s engine (Cesarani 2016, pp. 530–532).
6. Quoted in Pressac and van Pelt (1998, p. 209). See also Friedländer (2007, p. 359).
7. Pressac and van Pelt (1998, p. 210).
8. van Pelt and Dwork (1996, p. 302).
9. Pressac and van Pelt (1998, p. 212).
10. Quoted in Wellers (1993, p. 149).
11. Quoted in Wellers (1993, p. 149).
12. Pressac and van Pelt (1998, p. 213).
13. Piper (1998a, p. 163).
14. Höss (2001, p. 208).
15. In conflict with this account, Longerich (2012, p. 534) argues that Himmler may have emotionally acclimatized to watching mass shootings from close range.
16. In reference to Höss after the war, Lasik has noted, “in contrast to many other Nazi defendants, his behavior during the proceedings against him revealed a man capable of assuming responsibility for his deeds without begging for his life or trying to save it by lying or shifting the blame to others” (1998, p. 297).
17. Höss quoted in van Pelt and Dwork (1996, p. 320).
18. Pressac and van Pelt (1998, p. 215).
19. van Pelt and Dwork (1996, p. 321).
20. van Pelt and Dwork (1996, p. 320).
21. Lasik (1998, p. 292).
22. van Pelt and Dwork (1996, pp. 319–320).
23. Piper (1998a, p. 163) and Wellers (1993, pp. 168–169). According to Höss, soon after Himmler’s visit, Blobel arrived with instructions from Eichmann’s office that he (Blobel) was to open the pits and burn all the bodies previously buried. The ashes were to be broken down and dispersed so that it was impossible to determine the approximate number of victims. Blobel had learned such techniques, according to Höss, in Chelmno and was instructed to pass his knowledge on to Höss. Höss then visited Chelmno to learn what Blobel had discovered (Höss 2001, p. 188).
24. Adam (1989, p. 150) and Lasik (1998, p. 293).
25. Höss (2001, p. 212) and Lasik (1998, p. 294). According to Pressac and van Pelt (1998, p. 213), Auschwitz was attractive for two main reasons. First, the camp was adjacent to an excellent rail connection. Second, Auschwitz would soon be capable of incinerating large numbers of corpses per day.
26. Pressac and van Pelt (1998, p. 216).
27. van Pelt and Dwork (1996, p. 321).
28. Höss (2001, p. 190).
29. Speer (1981, p. 23, as cited in van Pelt and Dwork 1996, p. 324).
30. “The SS also planned to use the two remaining morgues as gas chambers, wrongly imagining that the high yield anticipated for the five triple-muffle furnaces would allow a staggered operation. In this configuration, an outside undressing room was indispensable. It was to open directly onto the service stairway connecting the two halls by way of the central
vestibule. Moreover, it proved necessary to improve the ventilation of Leichenkeller 2 (which was only deaerated) by adding an aeration system to bring air into the room. After the furnaces had been tested and their output better estimated, it became clear that they could not handle the “yield” of two gas chambers. Consequently, Leichenkeller 2 became an undressing room” (Pressac and van Pelt 1998, p. 224).

31. van Pelt and Dwork (1996, p. 324).
32. Pressac and van Pelt (1998, pp. 223–224).
33. Quoted in Pressac and van Pelt (1998, p. 200).
34. Quoted in Wellers (1993, pp. 157–158).
35. The Illustrated London News (14 October 1944, p. 442, as cited in Struk 2004, p. 144) provides a photo of one of these vents. This photo, however, is of Majdanek concentration camp’s gas chamber, which used the same gassing technique as Auschwitz though on a much smaller scale.
36. van Pelt and Dwork (1996, p. 331).
37. Pressac and van Pelt (1998, pp. 234, 236).
38. Quoted in Sereny (2000, p. 281).
39. Erdos (2013).
40. Fröhlich (1993, p. 454, as cited in Kühne 2010, p. 94).
41. Quoted Aly (2006, p. 113).
42. Quoted Aly (2006, pp. 115–116).
43. Quoted in Mallmann (2002, p. 122, as cited in Kühl 2016, p. 95).
44. Quoted in Schneider (2011, p. 212, as cited in Kühl 2016, p. 95).
45. Kühl (2016, pp. 100–101).
46. Kühl (2016, pp. 97–99).
47. Aly (2006, pp. 117–131).
48. Quoted in Aly (2006, p. 130).
49. Braham (1998, p. 458).
50. Stone (2010, p. 78). See also Mommsen (1986, p. 114).
51. Wellers (1993, p. 140).
52. Hilberg (1998, p. 88).
53. Lasik (1998, p. 295).
54. Hilberg (1998, p. 88) and Wellers (1993, p. 170).
55. Braham (1998, p. 462).
56. Braham (1998, p. 466) and Wellers (1993, p. 171) state the percentage of workers selected was about 10%. van Pelt and Dwork, however, put the figure within a range of 10–30% (1996, p. 342).
57. Pressac and van Pelt (1998, p. 238).
58. Braham (1998, p. 463).
59. Piper (1998a, p. 173).
60. Piper (1998a, p. 166).
61. Klee et al. (1988, p. 273) and Fleming (1984, p. 145).
62. Braham (1998, p. 462).
63. Quoted in Wellers (1993, p. 163).
64. Braham (2011, p. 45).
65. van Pelt and Dwork (1996, p. 342).
66. Piper (1998b, pp. 71–72). This point is clearly supported by Auschwitz’s rather conservative annual death rates. From May 1940 to January 1942 (a twenty month period), approximately 20,500 inmates died (Adam 1989, p. 149). However, after 1941 the rate of death rapidly increased. In 1942, approximately 200,000 Jews were killed in Auschwitz. In 1943, the number rose to about 250,000. And, in 1944, it more than doubled to approximately 600,000 victims (van Pelt and Dwork 1996, pp. 336, 343).
67. Hilberg (1961, p. 564).
68. Hayes (2017, p. 129).
69. Quoted in Wellers (1993, p. 150). See also Piper (1998a, p. 170).
70. See Braham (1998, pp. 463–464), Lanzmann (1995, p. 113), Piper (1998a, p. 173) and Wellers (1993, pp. 164, 167).
71. Rubenstein (1978, p. 61).
72. Quoted in Rees (2005, pp. 255–256).
73. Quoted Rees (2005, p. 254).
74. Clendinnen (1999, p. 147). Despite their inventive efforts to install the crucial ingredient of docility into the extermination process, both Höss and Stangl later claimed to have been perplexed as to why the victims went to their deaths so easily (Wistrich 2001, pp. 227, 229), effectively blaming the victims for their own demise, much like those in the shooting squads had done.
75. Quoted in Rees (2005, p. 254).
76. Quoted in Rees (2005, p. 127).
77. van Pelt and Dwork (1996, p. 350).
78. van Pelt and Dwork (1996, p. 350).
79. van Pelt and Dwork (1996, pp. 350–351).
80. Venezia (2009, pp. 59, 69).
81. Piper (1998a, p. 170) and Adam (1989, p. 150).
82. See Piper (1998a, p. 171).
83. Clendinnen (1999, p. 147).
84. Venezia (2009, p. 81).
85. Hayes (2017, p. 134).
86. Rees (2005, p. 230). See also Venezia (2009, pp. 83–84).
87. Adam (1989, p. 147).
88. Piper (1998c, p. 45).
89. Piper (1998c, p. 46).
90. Marcus (1974, p. 2).
91. Bauman (1989, pp. 149–150).
References

Adam, U. D. (1989). The gas chambers. In F. Furet (Ed.), Unanswered questions: Nazi Germany and the genocide of the Jews (pp. 134–154). New York: Schocken Books.

Aly, G. (2006). Hitler’s beneficiaries: Plunder, racial war, and the Nazi welfare state. New York: Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt and Company.

Bauman, Z. (1989). Modernity and the Holocaust. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Braham, R. L. (1998). Hungarian Jews. In Y. Gutman & M. Berenbaum (Eds.), Anatomy of the Auschwitz death camp (pp. 456–468). Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Braham, R. L. (2011). Hungary: The controversial chapter of the Holocaust. In R. L. Braham & W. J. vanden Heuvel (Eds.), The Auschwitz reports and the Holocaust in Hungary (pp. 29–49). New York: Columbia University Press.

Cesarani, D. (2016). Final solution: The fate of the Jews 1933–1949. London: Macmillan.

Clendinnen, I. (1999). Reading the Holocaust. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Erdos, E. (2013). The Milgram trap. Theoretical & Applied Ethics, 2(2), 123–142.

Fleming, G. (1984). Hitler and the final solution. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Friedländer, S. (2007). The years of extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939–1945. New York: Harper Perennial.

Hayes, P. (2017). Why? Explaining the Holocaust. New York: W. W. Norton.

Hilberg, R. (1961). The destruction of the European Jews. Chicago: Quadrangle Books.

Hilberg, R. (1998). Auschwitz and the final solution. In Y. Gutman & M. Berenbaum (Eds.), Anatomy of the Auschwitz death camp (pp. 81–92). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Höss, R. (2001). Commandant of Auschwitz: The autobiography of Rudolf Hoess. London: Phoenix Press.

Klee, E., Dressen, W., & Riess, V. (Eds.). (1988). “The good old days”: The Holocaust as seen by its perpetrators and bystanders. New York: Free Press.

Kühl, S. (2016). Ordinary organizations: Why normal men carried out the Holocaust. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Kühne, T. (2010). Belonging and genocide. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Lanzmann, C. (1995). Shoah: The complete text of the acclaimed Holocaust film. New York: Da Capo Press.

Lasik, A. (1998). Rudolf Höss: Manager of crime. In Y. Gutman & M. Berenbaum (Eds.), Anatomy of the Auschwitz death camp (pp. 288–300). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
Longerich, P. (2012). *Heinrich Himmler*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Marcus, S. (1974). Book review of ‘obedience to authority’ by Stanley Milgram. *The New York Times Book Review*, 79(2), 1–3.

Mommsen, H. (1986). The realization of the unthinkable: The ‘final solution of the Jewish question’ in the Third Reich. In G. Hirschfeld (Ed.), *The policies of genocide: Jews and Soviet prisoners of war in Nazi Germany* (pp. 97–144). London: Allan & Unwin.

Piper, F. (1998a). Gas chambers and crematoria. In Y. Gutman & M. Berenbaum (Eds.), *Anatomy of the Auschwitz death camp* (pp. 157–182). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Piper, F. (1998b). The number of victims. In Y. Gutman & M. Berenbaum (Eds.), *Anatomy of the Auschwitz death camp* (pp. 61–76). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Piper, F. (1998c). The system of prisoner exploitation. In Y. Gutman & M. Berenbaum (Eds.), *Anatomy of the Auschwitz death camp* (pp. 34–49). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Pressac, J. C., & van Pelt, R. J. (1998). The machinery of mass murder at Auschwitz. In Y. Gutman & M. Berenbaum (Eds.), *Anatomy of the Auschwitz death camp* (pp. 183–245). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Rees, L. (2005). *Auschwitz: A new history*. New York: BBC Books.

Rubenstein, R. (1978). *The cunning of history: The Holocaust and the American future*. New York: HarperCollins.

Sereny, G. (2000). *The German trauma: Experiences and reflections 1938–2000*. London: Allen Lane.

Stone, D. (2010). *Histories of the Holocaust*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Struk, J. (2004). *Photographing the Holocaust: Interpretations of the evidence*. London: I.B. Tauris.

van Pelt, R. J., & Dwork, D. (1996). *Auschwitz: 1270 to the present*. New York: W. W. Norton.

Venezia, S. (2009). *Inside the gas chambers: Eight months in the Sonderkommando of Auschwitz*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Wellers, G. (1993). Auschwitz. In E. Kogon, H. Langbein, & A. Rückerl (Eds.), *Nazi mass murder: A documentary history of the use of poison gas* (pp. 139–171). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Wistrich, R. S. (2001). *Hitler and the Holocaust: How and why the Holocaust happened*. Toronto, ON: Random House of Canada Limited.
**Open Access** This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter’s Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter’s Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.