

## Episode Guide: Murder & Intrigue

March 1944–December 1944

Prime Minister Winston Churchill and General Dwight D. Eisenhower confer on the progress of the war.

### Overview

"Murder & Intrigue" (**Disc 2, Title 2, 47:57**) explores the complex web of international politics spun during the last nine months of 1944. By that spring, the Allies knew about Auschwitz and had the military capability to bomb it. Yet despite the poignant pleas of Jewish leaders, the British and Americans decided not to bomb the railways or gas chambers. During the spring and summer, hundreds of thousands of Hungarian Jews were deported to Auschwitz at a time when the killing machinery had been honed to perfection. That autumn saw a significant act of resistance in Auschwitz when a group of Jewish prisoners revolted. Amazingly, before their deaths, some secretly wrote about their experiences.

In the Follow-up Discussion to the program (**Disc 2, Bonus Features, Title 11, Chapter 1, 6:14**) Linda Ellerbee talks with Gail Smith, senior fellow at the Center for American Progress and former special assistant to the president and senior director of African affairs at the National Security Council during the Clinton Administration; and Jerry Fowler, who has taught human rights law and policy at George Mason University Law School and is director of the Committee on Conscience at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

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

### Student Learning Goals

- Analyze the options and actions of the international community—including the United States, Great Britain, and Jewish leaders residing outside of Nazi territory—with regard to Auschwitz as the Red Army began to overtake the Nazis in Poland.
- Discuss the role of the *Sonderkommandos* in Auschwitz, and describe their revolt.
- Identify a population other than Jews who were targeted by the Nazis, and explain why the Nazis wanted to eliminate them.
- Describe the Nazis' behavior at Auschwitz as the Allies approached.
- Identify and discuss international political responses to genocide in the years following the Holocaust.

## 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. **Frenzied Killing (Start: 00:00; Length: 8:27):** By 1944, 550,000 people had already been murdered at Auschwitz, but that figure was soon to dramatically increase. In March 1944 the Nazis occupied Hungary, which was allied with Germany. But things were becoming difficult for the Germans and the SS enlisted a Hungarian Jew, Joel Brandt, to offer the Allies one million Jews in exchange for ten thousand trucks. Meanwhile, Rudolf Höss returned to Auschwitz to prepare for the arrival and mass murder of Hungarian Jews. While Brandt was delivering the Nazis' offer to Jewish leaders in Turkey, thousands of Jews were being sent to Auschwitz.
2. **Deporting Hungarian Jews (Start: 8:27; Length: 6:59):** As the deportations got under way, Adolf Eichmann, the SS officer who had met with Joel Brandt, allowed Brandt to leave Hungary to meet with various Jewish leaders in Istanbul in neutral Turkey. Alice Lok Cahana, Morris Venezia, and Dario Gabbai, Jewish survivors of Auschwitz, describe the selection process as the Hungarians arrived.
3. **Negotiating to Save Lives (Start: 15:26; Length: 7:45):** Brandt next went to Syria to meet with a representative of the Jewish Agency and a member of the British counter-intelligence unit. He was finally told the Allies rejected the Nazi offer, believing the Germans' plan was to use the trucks in the fight against the Soviets and thereby split the Allied forces in two. When the rejection was communicated to Adolf Eichmann, Jewish leaders asked him to spare the Jews. Eichmann, who was responsible for the transport of Jews, agreed to allow one train full of Jews to travel to a safe destination as a goodwill gesture, as long as the Jewish leadership selected the passengers. The train was supposed to go to Switzerland but stopped at the Bergen-Belsen camp, where it stayed six months before most of the passengers were finally sent to Switzerland.
4. **Sonderkommandos (Start: 23:11; Length: 8:55)** The spring and summer of 1944 were extremely busy times for the killing machines of Auschwitz and thus for the *Sonderkommandos*, the Jewish prisoners forced by the Nazis to work in the crematoria disposing of the dead. These prisoners worked under the constant threat of death and under tremendous psychic strain as they witnessed and furthered the Nazis' Final Solution. Also, by early 1944 Auschwitz escapees and Polish resistance fighters were able to communicate to the Allies about the existence and functions of Auschwitz. Their intelligence report came to be known as the "Auschwitz Protocols." International Jewish organizations called on the Allies to bomb the railways leading to Auschwitz as well as the camp's gas chambers. Although the Allies bombed the nearby IG Farben factory, they refused to attack the camp itself.

5. **Gypsies (Start: 32:06; Length: 6:48)** After the Allies complained about deportations of Hungarian Jews, the Hungarian government ended the deportations in July. The Nazis then focused their attention on the Roma (Gypsies) at Auschwitz. In August the SS began to liquidate the Gypsy camp, murdering thousands of Roma in the gas chambers. After the killings of the Romas and the ending of the transports from Hungary and the Łódź ghetto, the rate of people murdered at Auschwitz dropped significantly. This caused the *Sonderkommandos* to worry that their lives were in danger because their work would be in less demand. In response, on October 7, 1944, they attacked their SS guards and blew up a crematorium. The SS retaliated by killing many of the *Sonderkommandos*, whether they were involved in the uprising or not. They did not kill them all, however, because many corpses still needed to be discarded. In October a Nazi-backed militia overthrew the Hungarian government and resumed the deportation of Jews. Eichmann ordered tens of thousands of Hungarian Jews sent to Austria for forced labor. Because of a shortage of trains, the Jews were made to walk, and thousands died en route, for which Eichmann was criticized.
  
6. **Eliminating Evidence (Start: 38:54; Length: 9:03):** By January 1945, as Soviet troops approached, Himmler and the SS knew that Auschwitz's days were numbered, and they were determined to erase the evidence of its existence. The SS destroyed the gas chambers and crematoria, and they ordered prisoners who were able to march in frigid temperatures to train stations. Once there, the prisoners boarded open wagons and were transported to new camps closer to the interior of Germany. Many thousands died under these conditions. Although they acted with impunity during the war, Nazi leaders knew they would face retribution if Germany was defeated. In response, they prepared for escape.
  
7. **Follow-up Discussion (Disc 2, Bonus Features, Title 11, Chapter 1, 6:14):** Gail Smith and Jerry Fowler discuss why genocide continues to occur and what can be done about it.

## Learning Resources

**Timeline:** March 1944–December 1944

**Biographies:** Hansi and Joel Brandt, **Libusa Breder**, **Alice Lok Cahana**, Adolf Eichmann, **Eliezer Einsenschmidt**, **Darrio Gabbai**, **Stanislaw Hantz**, Heinrich Himmler, Adolf Hitler, Nicholas Horthy, Rudolf Höss, Rudolph Kasztner, **Eva Mozes Kor**, **Ibi Mann**, **Henryk K. Mandelbaum**, John McCloy, **Peretz Revesz**, **Franz Rosenbach**, Moshe Shertok, **Eva Speter**, **Wladyslaw Szmyt**, Dome Sztojay, Edmund Veessenmayer, **Morris Venezia**, Chaim Weizmann

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

**Glossary:** Allies, antisemitism, Arrow Cross, Auschwitz, "Auschwitz Protocols," Bergen-Belsen, Birkenau, concentration camp, crematorium, D-Day, Eastern front, extermination, gas chamber, Gypsy, IG Farben, Jerusalem, Jewish Agency, liase, Monowitz, Nazi, Palestine, Red Army, Reich, resistance, Sonderkommando, Soviet Union, SS, Zyklon B

**Readings:**

- 5.1. Excerpt from "Gypsies" (Charlotte Delbo).
- 5.2. "For Adolf Eichmann" (Primo Levi).
- 5.3. Excerpt from "The Scourge of Genocide: Issues Facing Humanity Today and Tomorrow" (Samuel Totten).

**Before Viewing the Film**

Although most people think first about Jewish victims when discussing the Holocaust, and in fact, Jews were the primary targets of the Nazis, other populations were also selected for annihilation, although not for the same reasons. Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, were persecuted for adhering to their beliefs, which held they could not salute Hitler, pledge allegiance to the Nazi state, or consider any human being as having godlike status. German homosexuals were targeted because they did not reproduce, whereas Jewish homosexuals were murdered because they were Jews. One of the topics dealt with in this program is the liquidation of the Hungarian Roma (Gypsies) at Auschwitz. The Roma, like the Jews, were singled out for racial reasons rather than for behavioral ones. Engage students in a discussion of group identity. First they divide a piece of paper into two columns. In the left column, students down all of the different groups to which they belong (e.g., the class, their family, those who love chess, females, those who rap, nerds, NASCAR enthusiasts, etc.). In the right column, they describe the basis for their membership (e.g., genetics, interest, behavior, or assigned by others). They might also note whether a particular group membership is fixed for all time or fluid, capable of changing. As they view the film, students record the various groups identified in the film (e.g., Gypsies, Jewish leaders, *Sonderkommandos*, SS), and compare the basis for membership in each of these groups.

**Post-Viewing Discussion**

- To give students a further look at the Gypsy population in Auschwitz and how they were treated, assign **Reading 5.1. Excerpt from "Gypsies"** by Charlotte Delbo. This poem may evoke strong emotions on the part of students. Before launching a discussion, give students a brief time to reflect privately on the poem and write down their reactions. *Discuss:*
  - The excerpt indicates that Gypsy women were treated differently than were Jewish women. What differences does Delbo highlight? Why did the Nazis make distinctions between the two groups?

- Delbo explains that the SS counted "the ranks of the gypsies," but they did "not see the woman with the dead baby and the frightening eyes." What does Delbo mean? How could they not see this woman?
- In this selection, Delbo uses one woman's experience to reflect the fate of the Gypsies in Auschwitz. Given what you have seen in the program and what you know of this woman, her actions, and her fate, what conclusions might you draw about the Gypsies in Auschwitz? To extend this discussion, students might research the beliefs of Jehovah's Witnesses, exploring why the Nazis chose to persecute them.
- In his memoirs, Höss wrote, "There is nothing new in antisemitism. It has always existed all over the world." Have students read current national newspapers for reports on contemporary antisemitic speech and actions and discuss what seems to be motivating the people involved. What actions are open to people who observe antisemitic behavior or find themselves in conversation with someone who has made an antisemitic remark?
- Adolf Eichmann is given special attention in this segment. Eichmann, a senior member of the SS, was responsible for transporting Jews across Nazi-controlled Europe to camps in Poland and for forcing Hungarian Jews on death marches because of a lack of trains. Assign **Reading 5.2. "For Adolf Eichmann,"** a brief poem by Primo Levi. *Discuss:*
  - What is the point of the first stanza, given the focus of the rest of the poem? Why did Levi start the poem in this way?
  - Why does the narrator question Eichmann directly in the second stanza? What does the poem tell us about Eichmann's actions during the Holocaust?
  - Why does the narrator say of Eichmann, "We do not wish you death"?
  - What is the tone of this poem? How does that tone affect the poem's meaning?
  - In May 1960 the Israelis kidnapped Eichmann and forcibly brought him to Israel to stand trial as a war criminal. Levi wrote this poem in July 1960, shortly after Eichmann's capture. What do the tone and style of the poem make you imagine would be Primo Levi's attitudes toward Eichmann 15 years after the end of World War II?
- In the Follow-up Discussion (**Disc 2, Bonus Features, Title 11, Chapter 1, 6:14**), Linda Ellerbee quotes Cynthia Ozick as follows: "What was acceptable once will be acceptable again." Ozick was revising an oft-used phrase, "What has happened once can happen again." Discuss this remark. What do you think Ozick meant by it? What is the difference between the two formulations? What is the importance of stressing acceptance rather than happenstance?

- Follow-up Discussion, Jerry Fowler asks if we are attaching fear and hostility to people around us who are different. Ask your students to provide some examples from their own lives of this trend. When do they fear others as a group? When do they perceive someone fearing them because of a group affiliation? Why does this occur? What purposes does it serve? And, most importantly, what do you think might help people to stop acting out of fear and hostility? Discuss alternative ways of behaving in such situations.
- **Reading 5.3. Excerpt from "The Scourge of Genocide: Issues Facing Humanity Today and Tomorrow"** discusses what nations can do about genocide and why they sometimes choose not to. Divide the class into small groups and have each group select one action they believe the United States could take to help people in a country in which genocide is occurring. They should be prepared to tell the rest of the class why they selected that particular option over others they considered, and what are the likely consequences of taking such an action. This assignment might be spread over two hours of the series because Episode 6 looks at the aftermath of the Holocaust and ends with a discussion by students on what actions are available to them as individuals.
- As a final assignment for the episode, have students research the current situation in Darfur in Sudan, a situation Secretary of State Colin Powell has defined as a genocide and discuss what actions are available to them and to the United States that might improve the situation. Several organizations have current events and discussions relating to Darfur on their Web sites. See United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Anti-Defamation League, Facing History and Ourselves, CareUSA, and the Darfur Information Center, among others. Also, Samantha Power has written insightful articles about this situation, both on the Op-Ed page of the *New York Times* on October 3, 2004, and in the January 6, 2005 issue of *The New Yorker*.