

# **A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF CONCENTRATION CAMPS IN THE NAZI ERA**

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## **I. ABSTRACT**

The concentration camps established in Nazi Germany bear witness to one of the most traumatic periods of human history, where the operationalisation of the policy of systematic genocide sent millions to their deaths. Terror had always been central to Nazi ideology and, violent suppression, which is the inevitable consequence of every totalitarian regime soon followed. However, the Nazis identified their enemies not on the grounds of their dissidence or criminal activity but on the basis of their “ethnic inferiority”. Jews, Slavs, Gypsies, Homosexuals and several other groups labelled as “anti-social” were dehumanised, robbed of their dignity and finally killed on the grounds of being biologically inferior. From a sociological standpoint it becomes imperative to examine not only the transformation of the camps into instruments of death but also German society’s meek acceptance of the violence and brutality which characterised the camp system. Furthermore, the camp went on to define a society of its own and its unique system of classification and administration present a sociological model of great interest. Far removed from the order of civilisation, the camps facilitated conditions where existing social norms warped under the twin pressures of slaughter and survival.

## **II. INTRODUCTION**

The horrors perpetrated within concentration camps of Nazi Germany have already been brought to trial before the world. The task of this research paper however, shall not be to bring about a condemnation of the camp system but to provide a sociological perspective on its origins, operation and impact. Persecution remains an inalienable element of authoritarian regimes and concentration camps are often utilised to detain individuals perceived as a threat to those in power. However, what needs to be traced is the radical transformation of the

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concentration camp in Nazi Germany from a means of internment to a system, which facilitated ethnically motivated genocide and death.

Concentration camps were never a product of Nazi Germany and in fact were first put to use by the British during the Boer conflict of 1900-1902 in an effort to detain rebel families.<sup>1</sup> In the beginning the idea of the camp was welcomed as a measure of exigency to hold traitors, saboteurs or conspirators incommunicado when they posed a threat to peace and security. However, the camp has always lain at the edge of civilisation far removed from the safeguards of the formal prison system and it did not take long for it to develop into a weapon of terror for those detained behind the barbed wire.<sup>2</sup>

The microcosm of the concentration camp presents a very interesting picture for the sociological analyst. It represents the appropriation of existing social norms by a group of select individuals and their subsequent perversion and radical transformation within the camp itself. Although the camps were run on the principle of total social control within a strict regulatory framework, camp society developed according to its own laws, which were constantly moulded by a set of fantastic social pressures. This phenomenon is rarely observed or almost entirely absent in other instances of isolated societies.

This research paper shall focus on the social structure specific to the camp, its internal relationships and accommodations. In the process of doing so it shall investigate the conditions prevailing in Nazi Germany which led to the conversion of the camp from an informal set up of imprisonment to a means of systematic extermination. There is also a need to understand the transformation of the social order within Germany, which enabled the tacit acceptance, and propagation of the camps despite its status as an enlightened and civilised Western society. The paper shall conclude with a sociological analysis of specific features of camp life in an attempt to flesh out its contrast with mainstream society.

### **III. THE TRANSFORMATION: FROM INTERNMENT TO GENOCIDE**

When viewed in retrospect, the manner in which concentration camps have been deployed throughout history has largely been the same with illegal confinement, torture, forced labour

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<sup>1</sup> Alan J. Harvey, *The Boer War*, 66 A.B.A. J. 630, 632 (1969).

Concentration camps where suspected persons were herded together played a considerable role during the South African Boer Conflict. The British primarily used them for the detention of all non-combatants including women and children.

<sup>2</sup> Arnold Brecht, *The Concentration Camp*, 50 COLUM. L. REV. 731, 733 (1950).

and mass executions being the norm. However, what set the Nazi concentration camp system apart was its sophistication and unnerving cruelty where inhumane techniques were relentlessly applied to select groups of people.<sup>3</sup>The extent of the concentration camp system in terms of the investment of resources, deployment of personnel and geographical coverage is evidence of a carefully conceived of policy whose primary aim was extermination. Moreover, the victims of this systematic execution were not chosen on the basis of their individual dissidence or anti-social activity but because they were members of a particular ethnic group whose continued existence in society became a matter of disdain for the Nazis.<sup>4</sup>

From a sociological perspective, the complex relationship between the Nazi Party and the German people provides a valuable insight into the circumstances, which led to the birth of the concentration camp as a tool of genocide. The Nazis since their inception were never truly a political movement but in fact were political usurpers who rejected the binding nature of the prevalent social and moral order and went about dismantling the very social system within which they had ascended to power.<sup>5</sup>Their motivation for recreating the social order was to ensure the perpetuation of the Nazi movement's grip on power irrespective of their ability to rule or German society's consent to be ruled by the likes of them.

It is clear that when a particular group comes to power, without regard to existing social processes and to the complete exclusion of other social groups the remainder of the population get divided into two categories: those who submit to the new regime and those who are regarded as potential opponents. The first group shall undoubtedly be subjugated by terror and the latter will have to be eliminated.<sup>6</sup> Dictatorial regimes have always been fearful of the spectre of the dissident; of those who do not conform to the mould laid down by those in power. As soon as the regime is threatened the non-conformist is identified, alienated and finally consigned to the concentration camp where he is killed.<sup>7</sup>

The Nazis legitimised their claim to power on the grounds of racial superiority and being "biologically superior", it was their prerogative to rule. It is from this ideology of racial elitism that stemmed the criterion for being an opponent of the Nazi regime. Certain racial groups such as the Jews, Gypsies and the Slavs were identified as being biologically inferior

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<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Hirschman & Ronald Paul Hill, *Human Rights Abuses by the Third Reich: New Evidence from the Nazi Concentration Camp Buchenwald*, 18 HUM. RTS. Q. 848, 859 (1996).

<sup>4</sup> Theodore Abel, *The Sociology of Concentration Camps*, 30 SOC. FORCES 150, 151 (1951).

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*

<sup>6</sup> H. G. Adler, *Ideas Toward a Sociology of the Concentration Camp*, 63 AM. J. SOC. 513, 514 (1958).

<sup>7</sup> BRECHT, *supra* note 2, at 770.

and thus had to be eliminated. The Nazis applied such classifications to Germans as well by creating the category of “asoziale” (anti-social) where all those classified as politically, sexually or mentally deviant by the regime were unceremoniously grouped for extermination.<sup>8</sup>

The conversion of the concentration camp into a factory of death under the Nazis thus emerged from a combination of power politics and perverted theories of eugenics.<sup>9</sup>The Nazis devoted extensive resources to “scientifically” establish biological, racial and ethnic differences between Germans and other inferior races. Several eminent German scholars went on to argue that the complete alienation of the Jews, Gypsies and other undesirable populations was necessary to preserve the sanctity of the Aryan gene pool.<sup>10</sup>The master-race concept, with the complementary assumption of the inferiority of other peoples thus formed the basis for the creation of death camps during the Nazi period.

#### **IV. THE DESENSITISATION OF GERMAN SOCIETY**

Before this research paper moves on to tackle the specific facets of camp life, it must first understand how an otherwise civilised Western society like Germany could remorselessly permit the infliction of extreme cruelty on other human beings. Certain scholars suggest that the mistreatment and cruelty meted out in the concentration camps would require a psychopathological mind-set on part of those in power. However, an empirical study of camp personnel conducted after the war suggested that only a fraction of the 50,000 guards and functionaries running the camps could be diagnosed with such a condition.<sup>11</sup>Thus to state that the ideology which gave rise to the camps arose from conditions unique to the German psyche would be fallacious at best.

An explanation for the desensitisation of German society towards the existence of the camps may be found in Sumner’s characterisation of the in-group. The formation of the in-group represents the collective’s tilt towards ethnocentricity; to rigidly accept only the “alike” and

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<sup>8</sup>ABEL, *supra* note 4, at 153.

<sup>9</sup>Francis Galton, *Eugenics: Its Definition, Scope and Aims*, 10 AM. J. SOC. 1 (1904).

Eugenics is mainly a social movement which deals with all influences that improve the inborn qualities of a race to their utmost advantage.

<sup>10</sup>Benno Müller-Hill, *The Blood from Auschwitz and the Silence of the Scholars*, 21 HIST. PHIL. LIFE SCI. 331, 334 (1999).

<sup>11</sup>ABEL, *supra* note 4, at 153.

unilaterally reject the “unlike”.<sup>12</sup> It has been observed that when the ruling class lays down restrictive parameters for membership of the in-group all those who fail to meet the criterion are subjected to a range of impermissible and violent behaviour.

The range of such behaviour generally increases with the degree of exclusion of the “unwanted” social group from the mainstream. In the case of Nazi Germany the undesirable classes like the Jews and the Gypsies were considered to be so far removed from ordinary society that they were regarded as an entirely different human species towards which no humane behaviour was possible.<sup>13</sup>

The Nazis had already established that those who were sent to the camps were of an inferior race, to whom the norms and principles of human conduct need not apply. Moreover, the manner in which the Nazis seized power and gained widespread political control was marked by the use of terror and extreme violence. With the Nazis at the helm and their ideology fast gaining root in a volatile post-war Germany, the politics of violence was soon rationalised and absorbed by German society.<sup>14</sup> As a consequence ruthlessness and the complete disregard of human values in relation to certain social groups was not only accepted but also condoned under the encouraging eye of the Nazi regime.

The continued use of violence in Nazi Germany created an expected and established pattern of behaviour towards certain social classes and groups regarded as enemies of the Reich. As a consequence of this normalisation all individuals who wished to find favour with the regime, obtain promotions or advancements or seek membership of the racial elite had to uphold these standards of violence and apply them vigorously in their daily lives.<sup>15</sup> Thus operating under the pressure of such extreme sociological conditions progress for Germans often became contingent on the application of principles that civilised society under any other circumstances would have abhorred and rejected.

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<sup>12</sup> Boris Bizumic, *Who Coined the Concept of Ethnocentrism? A Brief Report*, 2 JOURNAL OF SOCIAL AND POLITICAL PSYCHOLOGY 3, 4 (2014).

<sup>13</sup> Peter Baehr, *Identifying the Unprecedented: Hannah Arendt, Totalitarianism, and the Critique of Sociology*, 67 AM. SOC. REV. 804, 816 (2002).

<sup>14</sup> RICHARD BESSEL, *POLITICAL VIOLENCE AND THE RISE OF NAZISM: THE STORM TROOPERS IN EASTERN GERMANY* 85 (1984).

<sup>15</sup> ABEL, *supra* note 4, at 152.

## V. THE FACETS OF CAMP LIFE

Having established a basis for the creation and legitimisation of the concentration camp in German society this paper shall seek to provide a sociological perspective on the different aspects of camp life. Seated at the edge of civilisation the individuals living within the camps evolved a society of their own where existing norms and values were warped to give rise to a social order powered by the opposing forces of persecution and survival. From a sociological vantage point the following situations are of vital interest:

### *1. Redefining the Social Order: Classes and Classifications*

Within the first few weeks all those who entered the concentration camps went through a process of “social obliteration”<sup>16</sup> where all distinctions related to class, status, nationality and education were systematically stripped away from them. Such distinctions disappeared because they were of no consequence to gaining access to the resources necessary for the sustenance of life. Instead a new hierarchy emerged with different group dynamics whose sole purpose was geared towards the ultimate goal of survival.

The societal structure within the concentration camps was decidedly unequal with stark differences emerging among various social orders. While certain prisoners were condemned to a life of hard labour and death others lived their lives in luxury often tormenting and torturing their fellow inmates. Existing social norms completely disappeared because the camp unlike civil society was not based on the prospects of living an ordinary life but on the scarce opportunities for temporary survival.<sup>17</sup>

The traditional aspects of sociological analysis could no longer determine the various social strata within the concentration camp. Inmates had no access to the means of production and thus earning income to further social mobility was no longer a viable option.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, money had long lost its value in the camps where barter and black market economies usually thrived. Apart from some inmates who could land assignments in camp administration those

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid 154.

<sup>17</sup> WOLFGANG SOFSKY, THE ORDER OF TERROR: THE CONCENTRATION CAMP 117 (1997).

<sup>18</sup> JACOB GOLDSTEIN ET AL., INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE BEHAVIOR IN NAZI CONCENTRATION CAMPS: SOCIOLOGICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDIES ABOUT REPORTS OF HUNGARIAN-JEWISH SURVIVORS 45 (1991).

with a university education were usually subjected to harassment because of their perceived inability to perform physical labour.

Social order in the camps came to be determined by the classification system imposed upon the inmates by the camp administration, their membership in the Kommandos<sup>19</sup>, their influence as prisoner functionaries and carefully cultivated social and economic contacts. A complex system of classification consisting of colours and insignia determined the differentiation of one social class from the other. For instance, the coloured badges issued to criminals, asozialeprisoners, Gypsies and Jews were green, black, brown and yellow respectively.<sup>20</sup>

This system was not merely a means of bureaucratic classification but in fact an instrument of power whose main aim was to divide and discriminate against certain segments of the prisoner population. At the centre of power lay the camp administration staffed by the Schutzstaffel<sup>21</sup> (SS). The farther a social group lay from this power centre the lower it ranked on the social ladder and was also the likeliest to be exterminated. The more affinity that a group shared with those in power the likelier its chances for ultimate survival.

The primary basis for this classification stemmed from the racial disparity between human beings and those designated as sub-human. The Jews, Gypsies and the Slavic peoples were considered to be a different species altogether distinct from human society and were usually marked for immediate extermination. A rung above but still considered to be genetically inferior ranked the “asoziale” (anti-socials) which consisted of the homosexuals and the physically and mentally infirm. Political dissidents from other nations and religious groups like Jehovah’s Witnesses received better treatment in comparison to those considered sub-human. The top of the hierarchy was usually occupied by German criminals and political prisoners.<sup>22</sup>

Although the rigid classification system was imposed on the camps by the SS it usually met with largescale acceptance by the inmate population. The utilisation of racial categories of the likes of “Jew”, “Gypsy”, and “Slav” were common stereotypes in 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe. The

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<sup>19</sup>The Nazis created specialised work teams from the prisoner population itself to ensure that the camps ran smoothly. Such work teams were known as Kommandos and were often a source of power and influence while dealing with camp administration.

<sup>20</sup>FALK PINGEL, PRISONERS UNDER THE REIGN OF THE SCHUTZSTAFFEL 85 (1978).

<sup>21</sup> The Schutzstaffel Death’s Head divisions were German paramilitary forces tasked with running the concentration camps.

<sup>22</sup>SOFSKY, *supra* note 17 at 119.

environment of the concentration camp only sought to deepen and radicalise them further. Furthermore, the rigours of the camp system rendered the inmates powerless both collectively and individually. In such situations the inferiors usually adopt what is ascribed to them by those in power and begin defining themselves in terms that the dominant class assigns to them.<sup>23</sup>

Thus the reordering of social structures brought about within the confines of the concentration camp were so severe that they obliterated all norms and values that human beings had subjected to for a lifetime. In contrast to this perspective however, there were still some instances within the camps where prisoners sought to mimic the conditions of the outside world. The Jehovah's Witnesses and the Communists in particular retained to a very large extent their religious practices and political mobilisation respectively within the camps. Sociologically one may conclude that if individuals strongly associate with the promotion of a particular social cause deeper is their sense of "we-ness" and more likely are they to come together even in the face of insurmountable odds to undertake the activities which interest them.<sup>24</sup>

## 2. *Prisoner Self- Administration and the Delegation of Power*

The SS sought to exert its influence over all aspects of camp life however, even its extensive organisation could not oversee all possible contingencies. As a consequence of which the camp leadership created a group of collaborators from the prisoner population itself who were accorded substantial powers of control and authority over their fellow inmates. This delegation of power instead of weakening camp administration cemented it further leaving it firmly entrenched in the inmate psyche.

Although this delegation blurred the distinction between camp personnel and the prisoner population it also reduced the administrative responsibilities of the SS. These prisoner accomplices shouldered to a certain extent daily organisational duties and also maintained order amongst the inmates. In this regard they often wielded power with a brutality that exceeded even that of their masters.<sup>25</sup> These functionaries proved indispensable to the camp

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<sup>23</sup>JOHN G RICHARDSON, HANDBOOK OF THEORY AND RESEARCH FOR THE SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION 245 (1986).

<sup>24</sup>K. A. Bollen & R. H. Hoyle, *Perceived Cohesion: A Conceptual and Empirical Examination*, 69 SOC. FORCES 479, 483 (1990).

<sup>25</sup>PRIMO LEVI, THE DROWNED AND THE SAVED 42 (1989).

system without whom the maintenance of social order and dominance within the camps would have certainly collapsed.

This secondary system of camp administration was in fact a complex orientation of power. The functionaries had to strike a delicate balance between the SS on whom they depended for their power and authority and the inmate population, which they were tasked with overseeing. In the process they also sought to secure concessions, resources and support from the camp leadership for their beneficiaries and subordinates.<sup>26</sup> This form of self-administration as a means of providing representation to the prisoner population however was merely a façade. These prisoner functionaries were not elected from within the inmates but appointed over them by the SS. Their job was not to bring about social representation but to carry out the orders of the SS which most of them did often ruthlessly without remorse.

Apart from being camp overseers, several of these functionaries were appointed to administrative positions within workshops, kitchens and storerooms. Although these positions did not entail any disciplinary control over the inmate population<sup>27</sup> they were useful from an economic and social standpoint. They enabled functionaries to gain control over scarce resources, which were often peddled in the thriving camp black market. This economic monopolisation was a means of gaining social capital and allowed the prisoner functionaries to dispense essential items among other inmates cultivating them as loyal and dependent clients.

The primary source of the functionaries' power however, lay in their enthusiasm to imitate the SS in its conduct towards the inmate population. The inmates viewed the SS-functionary combine as a monolithic and homogenous source of persecution and terror. This often alienated functionaries from the remainder of the prisoners. Moreover, they often abused their power and influence to further the cause of their own survival within the drastic conditions of camp life. Knowing full well that they would never be able to return to the solidarity of their fellow inmates functionaries sought to constantly cultivate favour with the SS.<sup>28</sup>

This demonstration of loyalty towards the camp leadership involved the adoption of the SS techniques of violence and brutality.<sup>29</sup> In an attempt to outdo one another in eyes of the SS

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<sup>26</sup> PINGEL, *supra* note 20, at 56.

<sup>27</sup> SOFSKY, *supra* note 17 at 134.

<sup>28</sup> KLAUS DROBISCH, WIDERSTAND IN BUCHENWALD 84 (1978).

<sup>29</sup> There were several instances where the Kapos (camp overseers) struck prisoners with their truncheons with an enthusiasm which far exceeded that of their own superiors.

they beat, tormented and tortured prisoners at the whim of their masters. This exercise in violence was to demonstrate to the SS that they were perfect for the task assigned to them. However, greater the mistreatment meted out to the prisoners by the functionaries greater was the likelihood of severe reprisals from the inmate population if they lost their privileged position. Fearing the consequences of losing their status the functionaries intensified the exercise of terror and violence in an attempt to gain the protection of the SS.<sup>30</sup>

The prospects of survival in the concentration camp were exceedingly limited and hard to come by. However, those who chose to free themselves from the conditions of deprivation and gain control over the scarce resources available had to become accomplices of the regime. In the process of furthering their own survival the functionaries ensured that the policies of repression and genocide survived as well. Thus the camp represented the greatest extent of man's inhumanity to man where its conditions permitted victims to bring about co-victimisation and become accessories to the execution of their fellows.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The Second World War introduced the human race to the destructive power of modern technology however, the concentration camp, which operated in its backdrop brought humanity face to face with, organised terror. The camp represented an isolated collective far removed from the eyes of civilisation, which made possible the indiscriminate use of power and dominance.

The Nazis with their ideology of racial elitism identified all opponents of the regime from the prism of biological inferiority. They took great pains to prove that such undesirable groups were a threat to genetic sanctity and thus had to be alienated from German society. It was this identification of opponents on such a mass scale, which gave rise to genocide within the camps as an instrument of Nazi policy.

The Nazi Party's rise to power was characterised by violence and brutality however, once the regime was established such ruthless practices came to be legitimised and rewarded within German society. The application of Sumner's principles of ethnocentricity demonstrate that the Nazi's narrow definition of the in-group led to the Jews, Gypsies, Slavs and the asoziales to be regarded as a separate and lower species altogether whose extermination was to be

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<sup>30</sup>SOFSKY, *supra* note 17 at 140.

actively pursued and propagated. Thus German society unable to cope with a rapidly changing social order was rendered completely desensitised towards the slaughter being orchestrated in the camps despite possessing the vaunted principles of Western civilisation.

The investigation of the system of classification imposed by the camp administration showcases the extent of societal experimentation and modification that the regime could achieve within the confines of the concentration camp. Within a short period of time camp inmates were stripped of the familiar marks of civilisation, which they had been subjected to their entire lives. It is not difficult to perceive the camps as laboratories where social norms and values underwent radicalisation and transformation to enable human beings to condition other human beings.

Such were the social pressures inside the camps that they even turned victims into accomplices in the quest for the larger goal of survival. The regime maintained social control within the camps not on its own but by the means of a willing group of accessories who in order to protect their position of privilege had no qualms in subjecting their fellow inmates to violence, terror and torment. The concentration camp with its utter disregard for human life emerged from turbulent shifts of society however, the process did not stop there. The camp itself went on to define a society of its own where all means of social obliteration came to be confined within a tiny geographical space.

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