Death Marches in the Holocaust
By The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
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During the Holocaust, Nazi Germany confined Jews and other so-called “racially undesired elements” of German society to concentration camps. Towards the end of the war, concentration camp prisoners were evacuated, often on foot. The grueling marches that followed became known as “death marches.” This text discusses the motivations of the Nazi soldiers to evacuate prisoners, as well as what prisoners experienced during evacuations. As you read, take note of what motivated the Nazi soldiers’ brutal treatment of concentration camp prisoners during evacuations.

[1] A massive Soviet 1944 summer offensive in eastern Belarus annihilated German Army Group Center\(^1\) and permitted Soviet forces to overrun the first of the major Nazi concentration camps, Lublin/Majdanek. Shortly after that offensive, SS\(^2\) chief (Reichsfuehrer SS) Heinrich Himmler\(^3\) ordered that prisoners in all concentration camps and subcamps be evacuated toward the interior of the Reich.\(^4\) Due to the rapid Soviet advance, the SS had not had time to complete the evacuation of Majdanek. Soviet and western media widely publicized SS atrocities\(^5\) at the camp, using both footage of the camp at liberation and interviews with some of the surviving prisoners. The evacuations of the concentration camps had three purposes:

1. SS authorities did not want prisoners to fall into enemy hands alive to tell their stories to Allied and Soviet liberators;
2. the SS thought they needed prisoners to maintain production of armaments\(^6\) wherever possible;
3. some SS leaders, including Himmler, believed irrationally that they could use Jewish concentration camp prisoners as hostages to bargain for a separate peace in the west that would guarantee the survival of the Nazi regime.

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1. the name of one of the two strategic German strategic army groups
2. The SS, also known as the Schutzstaffel, was a semi-militarized organization under the control of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party.
3. Heinrich Himmler was responsible for devising and executing the Nazi’s plan to kill Europe’s Jews, also known as the Final Solution.
4. The Reich, also known as the Third Reich, was what Nazi Germany was often referred to.
5. Atrocity (noun): an extremely wicked or cruel act
6. military weapons and equipment
In the summer and early autumn months of 1944, most of the evacuations were carried out by train or, in the case of German positions cut off in the Baltic States, by ship. As winter approached, however, and the Allies reached the German borders and assumed full control of German skies, SS authorities increasingly evacuated concentration camp prisoners from both east and west on foot.

By January 1945, the Third Reich stood on the verge of military defeat. Most of German East Prussia was already under Soviet occupation. Soviet forces besieged Warsaw, Poland, and Budapest, Hungary as they prepared to push German forces back toward the interior of the Reich. After the failure of the surprise German Ardennes offensive in December 1944, Anglo-American forces in the west were ready to invade Germany.

The SS guards had strict orders to kill prisoners who could no longer walk or travel. As evacuations depended increasingly on forced marches and travel by open rail car or small craft in the Baltic Sea in the brutal winter of 1944-1945, the number who died of exhaustion and exposure along the routes increased dramatically. This encouraged an understandable perception among the prisoners that the Germans intended them all to die on the march. The term death march was probably coined by concentration camp prisoners.

During these death marches, the SS guards brutally mistreated the prisoners. Following their explicit orders, they shot hundreds of prisoners who collapsed or could not keep pace on the march, or who could no longer disembark from the trains or ships. Thousands of prisoners died of exposure, starvation, and exhaustion. Forced marches were especially common in late 1944 and 1945, as the SS evacuated prisoners to camps deeper within Germany. Major evacuation operations moved prisoners out of Auschwitz, Stutthof, and Gross-Rosen westward to Buchenwald, Flossenbürg, Dachau, and Sachsenhausen in winter 1944-1945; from Buchenwald and Flossenbürg to Dachau and Mauthausen in spring 1945; and from Sachsenhausen and Neuengamme northwards to the Baltic Sea in the last weeks of the war.

As Allied forces advanced into the heart of Germany they liberated hundreds of thousands of concentration camp prisoners. This included thousands of prisoners whom Allied and Soviet troops liberated while they marched on the forced evacuations. On April 25, 1945, Soviet forces met US forces at Torgau, on the Elbe River in central Germany. The German armed forces surrendered unconditionally in the west on May 7 and in the east on May 9, 1945. May 8, 1945, was proclaimed Victory in Europe Day (V-E Day).

To almost the last day of the war, German authorities marched prisoners to various locations in the Reich. As late as May 1, 1945, prisoners who had been evacuated from Neuengamme to the North Sea coastline were loaded onto ships; hundreds of them died when the British bombed the ships a few days later, thinking that they carried German military personnel.

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7. three countries in northern Europe: Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania
8. a region in southeast Belgium that extends into Luxembourg, Germany, and France
9. referring to British and American forces
10. “Unconditional” means “not subject to special terms or conditions.”
Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which statement identifies the central idea of the text? [RI.2]
   A. Few prisoners were subjected to death marches, as Allied troops were able to intervene during the evacuations.
   B. While treacherous, the SS never intended to kill any prisoners during the evacuation marches as they were needed for labor.
   C. Towards the end of the war, some concentration camp prisoners were able to escape the SS during evacuations.
   D. “Death marches” ended up becoming a tool for Nazi murder, but that was not the original intention of the evacuations.

2. PART B: Which TWO passages from the text best support the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
   A. “Shortly after that offensive, SS chief (Reichsfuehrer SS) Heinrich Himmler ordered that prisoners in all concentration camps and subcamps be evacuated toward the interior of the Reich.” (Paragraph 1)
   B. “...some SS leaders, including Himmler, believed irrationally that they could use Jewish concentration camp prisoners as hostages to bargain for a separate peace in the west that would guarantee the survival of the Nazi regime.” (Paragraph 4)
   C. “As winter approached, however, and the Allies reached the German borders and assumed full control of German skies, SS authorities increasingly evacuated concentration camp prisoners from both east and west on foot.” (Paragraph 5)
   D. “As evacuations depended increasingly on forced marches and travel by open rail car or small craft in the Baltic Sea in the brutal winter of 1944-1945, the number who died of exhaustion and exposure along the routes increased dramatically.” (Paragraph 7)
   E. “During these death marches, the SS guards brutally mistreated the prisoners. Following their explicit orders, they shot hundreds of prisoners who collapsed or could not keep pace on the march, or who could no longer disembark from the trains or ships.” (Paragraph 8)
   F. “As Allied forces advanced into the heart of Germany they liberated hundreds of thousands of concentration camp prisoners.” (Paragraph 9)

3. PART A: How does paragraph 7 contribute to the development of ideas in the text? [RI.5]
   A. It shows how heartless the SS was because it knew the prisoners wouldn’t survive the death marches.
   B. It shows how strong prisoners were because many were able to survive the treacherous marches.
   C. It proves how desperate the SS was to hide their crimes because it went to extreme means to kill prisoners.
   D. It proves how difficult it was to survive marches because prisoners often faced life threatening conditions.
4. **PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?**  
   **A.** “...Anglo-American forces in the west were ready to invade Germany.”  
   (Paragraph 6)  
   **B.** “...evacuations depended increasingly on forced marches and travel by open rail car...” (Paragraph 7)  
   **C.** “...the number who died of exhaustion and exposure along the routes increased dramatically.” (Paragraph 7)  
   **D.** “During these death marches, the SS guards brutally mistreated the prisoners...” (Paragraph 8)  

5. **The article lists three reasons for the evacuations of concentration camp prisoners – what do these three reasons have in common (Paragraphs 2-4)? Consider the overarching objectives of the SS.**
Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. The text discusses a variety of reasons for the evacuations and marches that concentration camp prisoners were subjected to – what do you think was the Nazi Party’s ultimate goal?

2. In the context of the article, what can we learn from tragedy? The SS disregarded the lives of prisoners until the very end of the war – what does this say about how the SS viewed Jewish people? How could this blatant disregard for human life been avoided or prevented? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.

3. In the context of the article, how do people face death? How did the members of the SS who led the death marches view the deaths of prisoners? How did prisoners face the prospect of death during these brutal evacuations? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.

4. In the context of the article, how are we changed by war? How were people’s understandings of right and wrong altered during World War II? How does the treatment of Jews exemplify this? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.