

New study finds up to 15,000 Jews killed each day at peak of Holocaust

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A new study, titled “Quantifying the Holocaust: Hyperintense kill rates during the Nazi genocide,” by the mathematical biologist Lewi Stone, has established that up to 15,000 Jews were killed on a daily basis between August and November 1942, a kill rate higher than in any other recorded genocide of the 20th century. At least 1.47 million Jews, more than a quarter of all victims of the Nazi genocide of European Jewry, were murdered within these three months.

Stone based his study and data visualizations, published in *Science Advances* at the beginning of this year, on data on the deportation trains to the death camps Treblinka, Sobibór and Bełżec. The data had been compiled by the Israeli historian Yitzhak Arad and published in his 1987 book about Operation Reinhard.

Operation Reinhard (Aktion Reinhard), was initiated in March 1942, two months after the Wannsee Conference of January 1942, at which 15 leading officials of the Nazi regime, the occupation authorities and the Wehrmacht discussed the concrete implementation of the “final solution of the Jewish question,” the Nazi euphemism for the targeted destruction of European Jewry.

Operation Reinhard, named after the leading Nazi Reinhard Heydrich, who was assassinated in 1942, was, in Stone’s words, “the largest single murder campaign of the Holocaust.” It targeted the almost 2 million Polish Jews who lived in the General Government, an administrative unit formed by the Nazis after their invasion of Poland in September 1939.

The industrialized mass murder operation was centered on three death camps: Treblinka, Sobibór and Bełżec. The death rate at these camps was 99.9 percent. Only 50 survivors of Treblinka are recorded, and almost 900,000 were killed there. A similar number survived Bełżec, where over 600,000 were killed.

The central role of this operation in the Holocaust has been known for some time, but many details remain unexplored. The Nazis systematically destroyed documentary evidence about it and the industrialized gassings were carried out in extreme secrecy.

While the operation began in March 1942 and technically lasted until November 1943, Stone points out that the vast majority of the killings took place within just 92 days, between

August and November 1942.

On July 19, 1942, Heinrich Himmler, the leader of the SS, gave an order demanding that all Jews within the General Government of Poland be liquidated by the end of December 1942.

Stone emphasizes that there was a direct relationship between the subsequent escalation of the killings and an order by Adolf Hitler. The SS leader Gerstein reported on August 15, 1942 that the “*Führer* ordered all action speeded up!” (Another book gives the date of the order as July 23, 1942.)

This “speedup” was manifested immediately in mass deportations, including the liquidation of the Warsaw Ghetto, the largest single ghetto in Europe, which began on July 22, 1942 with mass deportations to Treblinka. Over a seven-week period, at least one train with an average of 5,000 to 6,000 victims left the ghetto on a daily basis. Many of the deported died *en route*. All others were gassed immediately after they arrived in Treblinka. The “speedup,” as calculated by Stone, lasted for 105 days, from July 22 to November 4, 1942.

The study quotes the 1944 testimony of one of the handful of survivors of Bełżec, Rudolf Beder: “During those three months I saw every day a ‘transport’ of 50 cars with 100 prisoners in each car—that is, 5,000 victims sent to Bełżec. A second identical ‘transport’ arrived every evening. These prisoners were held in the suffocating cars without food or water until 6 o’clock the following morning. A minimum of 10,000 victims were murdered every 24 hours. There were days when three ‘transports’ arrived. There were days when more than 50 wagons were hauled in each ‘transport.’ The ‘transports’ came seven days a week.”

Within these 105 days, “a minimum of 1.32 million victims were murdered by the Nazis, of which 292,000 were murdered by bullets. Hence, not only is Operation Reinhard the largest murder campaign within the Holocaust. It also happened at a remarkably faster pace than previously recognized.”

By the end of 1942, few Jews were left in the General Government and the Nazis now started to focus on deporting and murdering the remaining Jews in Europe at Auschwitz-Birkenau, which experienced its highest kill rate in 1944. (In the summer of 1944 alone, some 400,000 Jews from Budapest, Hungary were gassed at Auschwitz within a few weeks.)

Stone points out that the kill rate of the Holocaust (meaning the number of killings per day) during Operation Reinhard was some 80 percent higher than the Rwandan massacre killings, which have been repeatedly cited as being more murderous than the Holocaust. The kill rate of the Holocaust, Stone stated in an interview with *Scientific American*, “has been underestimated by an order of six to 10 times.”

Stone explained the significance of his study in the interview: “While Operation Reinhard is considered the largest single murder campaign of the Holocaust, the extraordinary speed at which it operated to obliterate the Jewish people has been poorly estimated in the past and almost completely unknown to the general public. The minimal time in which the operation took place indicates the enormous coordination involved by a state machinery responsive to the Führer’s murderous will to eradicate a people. The train records show how zones were emptied of Jewish communities one by one in an organized manner, and how intense kill rates were achieved in targeted areas that only slowed as victims ran out. My plots of the data and a film visualization highlight the pace and frenzy of this mass murder.”

In Volhynia, the Nazis shot about 150,000 people. In the north of the Generalkommissariat, they shot at least 70,000, and in Podolia about 10,000. Many of these shootings took place in what Gerlach called “improvised death camps.”

Among those was Bronnaya Gora, where people were in part deported by trains. The SS leader Hans-Adolph Prützmann reported a total of 363,211 killed Jews for the period August 1 to November 30, 1942, out of which 271,017 were killed in September and October of 1942. (Christian Gerlach, *Krieg, Ernährung, Völkermord. Deutsche Vernichtungspolitik im Zweiten Weltkrieg*, Zürich 2002, pp. 222-23.)

In other words, Stone’s estimated Holocaust kill rate in this three-month period would have to be corrected upward, taking into account killing operations that occurred alongside Aktion Reinhard.

Overall, more than half of the estimated 6 million Jews killed by the Nazis were murdered between March 1942 and March 1943, and, as Stone shows, over a quarter within just three months.

Jews, whom the Nazis, as all far-right movements in Europe, regarded as the main base for and leadership of the socialist and Marxist movement, had been persecuted systematically first in Germany after 1933 and then in the countries under Nazi occupation. Genocidal massacres of Jews (including children, women and the elderly) started with the Nazi assault on the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941. By the end of 1941, an estimated 1 million Soviet Jews had been killed in massacres perpetrated by the SS Einsatzgruppen and the Wehrmacht.

Hundreds of thousands also died due to diseases and famine as a result of a policy of annihilation by starvation carried out by the German occupation authorities in Nazi-occupied Poland. In the Warsaw Ghetto alone, which housed some 400,000 Jews

at its peak, about 100,000 died of famine and diseases such as typhus before the mass deportations to the death camps began.

Despite these atrocities, up until the spring of 1942, the single largest victim group of the Nazis were not the Jews, but the Soviet prisoners of war, who were starved to death systematically in camps and on death marches at a rate of up to 300,000 per month in the fall and spring of 1941/1942, with 85 to 90 percent of all Soviet POWs killed. Overall, the Nazis murdered over 3 million Soviet POWs by the end of the war, and over 2 million of them by the spring of 1942.

Gerlach has convincingly argued that a major motivation for the rapid escalation and speed-up of the already planned murder of the Polish Jews in 1942 in the General Government and Volhynia and Podolia was the food crisis in the German Reich, which threatened to affect both the Wehrmacht and the German civilian population.

Averting a major famine in the German Reich was a priority for the Nazi leadership, given the experience of the First World War, when the famine of 1917/1918 directly contributed, along with the October Revolution in Russia, to the radicalization of the German working class and the outbreak of revolutionary struggles in 1918/19.

The Nazi occupation also increasingly encountered mass resistance across Europe, including in France, Yugoslavia and the occupied countries and Soviet territories in Eastern Europe. Thus, under conditions of an extreme crisis of the German imperialism, the Nazis, based on both material and ideological motives, perpetrated genocidal massacres on a scale and at a pace the world has not seen either before or since.

Stone’s study is very significant in that it highlights the scale of the crimes of the Nazis. It is all the more important as it comes at a time when bourgeois states internationally, including in Germany, resort again to the promotion of fascist forces.

The build-up of the far-right against the working class is accompanied by the systematic promotion of historical falsifications and attempts by state-sponsored academics to downplay the crimes of fascism in the 20th century. This international tendency is embodied most sharply by Jörg Baberowski at Berlin’s Humboldt University, who has declared that “Hitler was not vicious” and disliked discussions about the destruction of the Jews at his dinner table.

Stone’s calculations and data visualizations contribute to exposing the criminal character of these policies and historical lies.



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