

The Death Marches – The Final Phase of Nazi Genocide
by Daniel Blatman, translated by Chaya Galai.
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As the Second World War was in its final months, frantic efforts were made by the Nazis to remove the evidence of their genocidal actions and also to transport to Germany as many potential slave labourers as they could; in this double endeavour many of the camps were liquidated and those of their inmates well enough (relatively) to march out were forced to do so. The fate that befell these hapless men and women was so terrible that these transports have become known as 'Death Marches'.

The worst aspects of the Holocaust are widely known and discussed in the 21st century, but the tendency is to focus on the concentration camp 'universe', the activities of the Einsatzgruppen, and the institutionalization of anti-Semitic ideology in the Nazi state; the death marches have been mentioned in many books about the Holocaust but there has been no study devoted to them exclusively, nor in the sort of depth to which Daniel Blatman has extended his research.

The Death Marches sets these acts of final torture in the context of the Nazi persecution of Jews and others, as well as cataloguing what happened on specific marches in terrible detail. The book is divided into two sections: The System Disintegrates and Criminal Communities, followed by copious notes and a huge bibliography.

Blatman considers the way chaos ensued in the eastern camps as the Russians drew near, and of how frenzies of violence were unleashed on the sick and infirm before the able-bodied were marched out; he documents the uncertainty about precise orders for handling the marchers and the ways in which these were locally interpreted, often with extra brutality being the outcome, and in the second section he considers the ways in which all strata of German society were drawn into acts of mass murder when some of the camp survivors marched into Germany. He highlights a massacre at Gardelegen, of which I had never heard, when over a thousand prisoners were gratuitously burned alive, and documents the course of events in great detail. When set against the enormity of the deaths in camps like Mauthausen and

Auschwitz, a thousand lives may seem but a small number, but the mindless nature of the massacre, when the war was lost, makes it, if anything, even more tragic.

What makes the Death Marches the powerful book that it is rests not just on the events that it describes but the state of mind of the perpetrators of these final genocidal acts in the dying days of the Third Reich. Many of these murderous criminals survived the war and some the judicial process and understanding why they did what they did in the circumstances in which they did them is far from easy to comprehend.

Blatman looks at the psychology of the events and explains plausibly that the ways in which young and old, Hitler Youth and Volksturm, regular soldiers and SS, shared in the gratuitous killing of Jews can only be understood by accepting that the constant demonization of Jews that was a trait of Nazi ideology from its very beginnings, coupled with a sense that the people they had treated so appallingly would exact a terrible revenge once they were free made them into brutal killers removed all other considerations from their minds.

The Death Marches is an exceptional retelling of one of the worst and perhaps least-known aspects of the Holocaust and a reminder of the utter depravity not just of the Nazi ideologues but their millions of compatriots.

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