

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The Germans sited Auschwitz in Silesia, in the south-east part of Poland, after first incorporating that region into the German Reich. Why did they choose that location? What challenges had to be overcome in order to create a concentration camp in that location?
2. Although technically Auschwitz was located in Germany, in what ways did Auschwitz differ from other camps located in Germany? How did this location impact the multinational prisoner population? How did it impact the surrounding civilian population?
3. The official beginning date of Auschwitz is 14th June, 1940, with the arrival of the first transport of Polish political prisoners, which included several dozen Jews. An SS officer greeted each new transport of prisoners with these words: 'If there are any Jews in the transport, they cannot live more than two weeks, if there are priests, they may live one month, the rest three months' [p. 20]. In what ways did the Germans' changing fortunes of war over the following years affect their treatment of prisoners?
4. Before the war, Poland was home to the largest absolute number of Jews in Europe; and measured by percentage, Poland had the largest population of Jews in the entire world. Although Auschwitz is indelibly identified with the Germans' extermination of Jews, now referred to as the Holocaust, that was not the camp's original purpose. What were the Germans' original purposes for Auschwitz? When did extermination of Jews become one of the principal purposes of Auschwitz? How did the Germans carry out that purpose?
5. The Polish resistance organization in the camp sent out many reports, in a variety of ways, about the Germans' extermination

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of the Jews, asking for an Allied attack on Auschwitz to stop the slaughter. These intelligence reports and requests were sent on to the other Allies by the Polish underground in Warsaw, but without any result. With the benefit of hindsight and a more complete understanding of the greater context of the war, discuss the reasons why you think the Allies did not respond, including political, logistical and moral factors. If a similar situation were to occur today, what do you think the response would be?

6. The Germans' industrialized extermination of Jews at Auschwitz also included confiscation of Jewish belongings. What did the Germans do with such belongings? What effects did this have on the rest of the camp?
7. During the initial period of Auschwitz's existence, Poles were the only nationality of prisoners. When and how did this change? What other nationalities were eventually represented among the prisoner population? What were the relative numbers of prisoners of each nationality? Did the Germans treat the various nationalities the same, and if not, how did treatment vary?
8. The author documents the existence of several different resistance groups among the prisoners. Why were there so many groups? On what factors were they based? How were they structured?
9. The largest number of such groups was formed among the Polish prisoners. What were the goals of the Polish resistance movement at Auschwitz? With respect to each such goal, what methods did the prisoners use to reach that goal, and were they successful?
10. How, if at all, did the goals differ for different prisoner resistance groups? Compare the goals and accomplishments of the Poles to those of the communists, Soviets, Jews, French, women, and other groups.

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11. Witold Pilecki, an officer in the Polish Army, volunteered for an almost certainly suicidal undercover mission—to get himself arrested by the Germans and sent to Auschwitz, in order to build a resistance organization among the prisoners and smuggle out intelligence about what was going on there. How well did Pilecki succeed in his mission?
12. At one point, Pilecki says: ‘At last I lived to see the moment of which once I had dreamed hopelessly—we had organized a political cell of our organization where colleagues, who in the outside world had fought venomously in Parliament, worked together in harmony’ [p. 117]. What role did the Polish political parties play in the nearby areas surrounding Auschwitz, and within the Polish underground in Warsaw? Why did Pilecki feel it was important to bring together these political parties inside Auschwitz?
13. Over time, most of the Polish resistance groups were unified into the Union of Military Organization (ZOW), in cooperation with the major Polish political parties present in the camp. Subsequently, an Auschwitz Camp Military Council was also formed. Which groups cooperated with each other, and in what ways? Which groups remained separate, and why?
14. The Germans divided prisoners at Auschwitz into several different classifications. What were these classifications? How was each evidenced? Did the Germans treat the classifications differently, and if so, how?
15. In many cases, members of one family were arrested and sent to Auschwitz. Name a few examples of this, and discuss the fates of those family members.
16. For the first two years, the prisoners included only men. When were the first women brought to Auschwitz? How did the men prisoners react to this development? What challenges did women prisoners face that men did not?

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17. What kinds of help did the prisoners receive from outside Auschwitz? How did coordination and cooperation between those inside and those outside the camp evolve over time?
18. In a number of places throughout the book, the author touches on the importance of character. What human qualities would you include within the meaning of character? In what ways did these qualities manifest in the camp—both positive and negative, among Germans, among prisoners, and among the population outside the camp?
19. The issue of character is inextricably entwined with the idea of heroism. What makes a hero? Describe some of the different kinds of heroism. Name some of the people in the book whose actions you consider to be heroic. If you had been a prisoner at Auschwitz, how do you think you would have acted?
20. In what ways did *Fighting Auschwitz* broaden your knowledge and understanding of Auschwitz, the Holocaust, and the role played by the Polish underground during World War II?