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What we knew: coverage of the Holocaust in Canadian newspapers

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Introduction

Millions of Jews and other "racially inferior" groups were systematically murdered by the Nazi regime in the span of months. In 1945, in the days before the term "genocide" had entered the average Canadian's lexicon, what did Canadians know about what we now refer to as the Holocaust, as it was happening? As the advancing Allied armies liberated concentration camps, making available information about what had happened, was this information reported in the press?

I sought to answer this question by examining the two most popular Canadian newspapers: The Toronto Daily Star and the Montreal Gazette. I selected the weeks that I believed would be most likely to contain coverage of the Holocaust, the weeks following the liberation of Auschwitz. The Holocaust complex of camps has come to symbolize the Holocaust, and evil more broadly. I reviewed the pages of the Toronto Daily Star from January 24 – February 28 and from May 7 – May 18 and pages of the Montreal Gazette from January 24 – February 10.

General Findings

The Toronto Daily Star and the Montreal Gazette differ enormously in their coverage of the Holocaust. In the period examined, the Star ran 20 articles referencing systematic atrocities against European Jewry. These articles include detailed accounts of concentration camps. In contrast, in the weeks following the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, coverage in Canada's second largest newspaper was limited. The Gazette published three articles about the persecution of Jews in Europe: two about how Nazi criminals should be punished and one about local Jewish athletes and followed teams representing the Jewish community events. The newspaper's sports section mentioned local Jewish athletes and followed teams representing the Jewish community events.

When do articles appear?

The Toronto Daily Star printed several articles on liberated concentration camps a week after the events. The Soviet army liberated Auschwitz-Birkenau January 27, 1945, however it wasn't until February 2 that the front-page (2nd edition) featured an article on the discovery of a "murder factory" near Oswiecim, Poland (pictured). There was another in-depth article on the concentration camp on February 19 (2nd edition). The visit of the American Congressional committee and the release of the Soviet report on Auschwitz caused a series of articles to appear in mid-May 1945.

The press and the local Jewish community

The Gazette coverage of the persecution of Jews in Europe was sparse. However, there was extensive coverage of local Jewish community events. The newspaper's sports section mentioned local Jewish athletes and followed teams representing the Jewish community events.

Graphic language and photos

Language used in the 1945 articles was graphic and sensationalist by today's standards. Articles detailed Nazi torture practices and killing methods. The May 11 front page of the Toronto Daily Star included a photograph of a Nazi official among corpses in the Landsberg concentration camp.

Conclusion

In 1945, What Canadians knew about the Holocaust largely depended on their choice of newspaper. Attentive readers of the Toronto Daily Star in the early months of 1945 could have had fairly significant knowledge of the Nazi persecution of Jews. On the other hand, subscribers to Montreal's most popular newspaper could have read the paper every day and only possessed a faint knowledge that Jews, like many civilians, suffered under Nazi occupation. The Gazette never references concentration camps.

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