

INTRODUCTION TO THE HOLOCAUST

The Holocaust was the systematic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of six million Jews by the Nazi regime and its allies and collaborators. The Nazis came to power in Germany in January 1933. They believed that the Germans belonged to a race that was "superior" to all others. They claimed that the Jews belonged to a race that was "inferior" and a threat to the so-called German racial community.

KEY FACTS

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By 1945, the Germans and their allies and collaborators killed nearly two out of every three European Jews as part of the "Final Solution." The "Final Solution" ⓘ was the Nazi policy to murder the Jews of Europe.

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Introduction

The Holocaust was the systematic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of six million Jews by the Nazi regime and its allies and collaborators. *Holocaust* is a word of Greek origin meaning "sacrifice by fire." The Nazis, who came to power in Germany in January 1933, believed that Germans were "racially superior" and that the Jews, deemed "inferior," were an alien threat to the so-called German racial community.

During the era of the Holocaust, German authorities also targeted other groups because of their perceived racial and biological inferiority: Roma (Gypsies), people with disabilities, some of the Slavic peoples (Poles, Russians, and others), Soviet prisoners of war, and blacks. Other groups were persecuted on political, ideological, and behavioral grounds, among them Communists, Socialists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and homosexuals.

What Was the Holocaust?

In 1933, the Jewish population of Europe stood at over nine million. Most European Jews lived in countries that Nazi Germany would occupy or influence during World War II. By the end of the war in 1945, the Germans and their allies and collaborators killed nearly two out of every three European Jews as part of the "Final Solution."

The Nazis considered Jews to be the inferior race that posed the deadliest menace to the German

Volk. Soon after they came to power, the Nazis adopted measures to exclude Jews from German economic, social and cultural life and to pressure them to emigrate. World War II provided Nazi officials with the opportunity to pursue a comprehensive, "final solution to the Jewish question": the murder of all the Jews in Europe.

While Jews were the priority target of Nazi racism, other groups within Germany were persecuted for racial reasons, including Roma (then commonly called "Gypsies"), Afro-Germans, and people with mental or physical disabilities. By the end of the war, the Germans and their Axis partners murdered up to 250,000 Roma. And between 1939 and 1945, they murdered at least 250,000 mentally or physically disabled patients, mainly German and living in institutions, in the so-called Euthanasia Program.

As Nazi tyranny spread across Europe, the Germans and their collaborators persecuted and murdered millions of other people seen as biologically inferior or dangerous. Between two and three million Soviet prisoners of war, viewed by the Nazis as the biological "carriers" of Bolshevism, were murdered or died of starvation, disease, neglect, or brutal treatment. The Germans shot tens of thousands of non-Jewish members of the Polish intelligentsia, murdered the inhabitants of hundreds of villages in "pacification" raids in Poland and the Soviet Union, and deported millions of Polish and Soviet civilians to perform forced labor under conditions that caused many to die.

From the earliest years of the Nazi regime, German authorities persecuted homosexuals and other Germans whose behavior did not conform to prescribed social norms (such as beggars, alcoholics, and prostitutes), incarcerating thousands of them in prisons and concentration camps. German police officials similarly persecuted thousands of Germans viewed as political opponents (including Communists, Socialists, Freemasons, and trade unionists) and religious dissidents (such as Jehovah's Witnesses). Many of these individuals died as a result of maltreatment and murder.

Implementation of the "Final Solution"

World War II provided Nazi officials the opportunity to adopt more radical measures against the Jews under the pretext that they posed a threat to Germany. After occupying Poland, German authorities confined the Jewish population to ghettos, to which they also later deported thousands of Jews from the Third Reich. Hundreds of thousands of Jews died from the horrendous conditions in the ghettos in Poland and other parts of Eastern Europe.

Following the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, Einsatzgruppen and Waffen SS units, with support from the Wehrmacht, moved behind German lines to murder Jews, Roma, and Soviet state and Communist Party officials in mass shootings as well as in specially equipped gas vans. Mass shootings of Jews continued throughout the war, many conducted by militarized battalions of the German Order Police. These shooting operations are estimated to have claimed the lives of more than 1.5 million Jews.

In late 1941, Nazi officials opted to employ an additional method to kill Jews, one originally developed for the "Euthanasia" Program: stationary gas chambers. Between 1941 and 1944, Nazi Germany and its Allies deported nearly three million Jews from areas under their control to Nazi-occupied Poland. The vast majority were sent to killing centers, often called extermination camps, at Belzec, Chelmno, Sobibor, Treblinka, and Auschwitz-Birkenau, where they were murdered primarily by means of poison gas. Some able-bodied Jewish deportees were temporarily spared to perform forced labor in ghettos, forced labor camps for Jews, or concentration camps in Nazi-occupied Poland and the Soviet Union. Most of these workers died from starvation and disease or were killed when they became too weak to work.

My mother ran over to me and grabbed me by the shoulders, and she told me "Leibele, I'm not going to see you no more. Take care of your brother."

—Leo Schneiderman describing arrival at Auschwitz, selection, and separation from his family

The End of the Holocaust

In the final months of the war, SS guards moved camp inmates by train or on forced marches, often called "death marches," in an attempt to prevent the Allied liberation of large numbers of prisoners. As Allied forces moved across Europe in a series of offensives against Germany, they began to encounter and liberate concentration camp

prisoners, as well as prisoners en route by forced march from one camp to another. The marches continued until May 7, 1945, the day the German armed forces surrendered unconditionally to the Allies.

For the Western Allies, World War II officially ended in Europe on the next day, May 8 (V-E Day), while Soviet forces announced their "Victory Day" on May 9, 1945.

In the aftermath of the Holocaust, more than 250,000 survivors found shelter in displaced persons camps run by the Allied powers and the United Nations Refugee and Rehabilitation Administration in Germany, Austria, and Italy. Between 1948 and 1951, 136,000 Jewish displaced persons immigrated to Israel, while others resettled in the United States and other nations outside Europe. Other Jewish displaced persons emigrated to the United States and other nations. The last camp for Jewish displaced persons closed in 1957.

The crimes committed during the Holocaust devastated most European Jewish communities and eliminated hundreds of Jewish communities in occupied eastern Europe entirely.

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CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

-  What can we learn from the massive size and scope of the Holocaust?
-  Across Europe, the Nazis found countless willing helpers who collaborated or were complicit in their crimes. What motives and pressures led so many individuals to persecute, to murder, or to abandon their fellow human beings?
-  Were there warning signs of what was to come before the Nazis came to power in 1933? Before the start of mass killing in 1941?