

Introduction To The Holocaust

The Holocaust (also called *Shoah* in Hebrew) refers to the period from January 30, 1933, when Adolf Hitler became chancellor of Germany, to May 8, 1945 (VE Day), when the war in Europe ended. During this time, Jews in Europe were subjected to progressively harsh persecution that ultimately led to the murder of 6,000,000 Jews (1.5 million of these being children) and the destruction of 5,000 Jewish communities. These deaths represented two-thirds of European Jewry and one-third of world Jewry. The Jews who died were not casualties of the fighting that ravaged Europe during World War II. Rather, they were the victims of Germany's deliberate and systematic attempt to annihilate the entire Jewish population of Europe, a plan Hitler called the "Final Solution" (*Endlösung*).

After its defeat in World War I, Germany was humiliated by the Versailles Treaty, which reduced its prewar territory, drastically reduced its armed forces, demanded the recognition of its guilt for the war, and stipulated it pay reparations to the allied powers. The German Empire destroyed, a new parliamentary government called the Weimar Republic was formed. The republic suffered from economic instability, which grew worse during the worldwide depression after the New York stock market crash in 1929. Massive inflation followed by very high unemployment heightened existing class and political differences and began to undermine the government.

On January 30, 1933, Adolf Hitler, leader of the National Socialist German Workers (Nazi) Party, was named chancellor by president Paul von Hindenburg after the Nazi party won a significant percentage of the vote in the elections of 1932. The Nazi Party had taken advantage of the political unrest in Germany to gain an electoral foothold. The Nazis incited clashes with the communists, who many feared, disrupted the government with demonstrations, and conducted a vicious propaganda campaign against its political opponents-the weak Weimar government, and the Jews, whom the Nazis blamed for Germany's ills.

Propaganda: "The Jews Are Our Misfortune"

A major tool of the Nazis' propaganda assault was the weekly Nazi newspaper Der Stürmer (The Attacker). At the bottom of the front page of each issue, in bold letters, the paper proclaimed, "The Jews are our misfortune!" *Der Stürmer* also regularly featured cartoons of Jews in which they were caricatured as hooked-nosed and apelike. The influence of the newspaper was far-reaching: by 1938 about a half million copies were distributed weekly.

Soon after he became chancellor, Hitler called for new elections in an effort to get full control of the Reichstag, the German parliament, for the Nazis. The Nazis used the government apparatus to terrorize the other parties. They arrested their leaders and banned their political meetings. Then, in the midst of the election campaign, on February 27, 1933, the Reichstag building burned. A Dutchman named Marinus van der Lubbe was arrested for the crime, and he swore he had acted alone. Although many suspected the

Nazis were ultimately responsible for the act, the Nazis managed to blame the Communists, thus turning more votes their way.

The fire signaled the demise of German democracy. On the next day, the government, under the pretense of controlling the Communists, abolished individual rights and protections: freedom of the press, assembly, and expression were nullified, as well as the right to privacy. When the elections were held on March 5, the Nazis received nearly 44 percent of the vote, and with 8 percent offered by the Conservatives, won a majority in the government.

The Nazis moved swiftly to consolidate their power into a dictatorship. On March 23, the Enabling Act was passed. It sanctioned Hitler's dictatorial efforts and legally enabled him to pursue them further. The Nazis marshaled their formidable propaganda machine to silence their critics. They also developed a sophisticated police and military force.

The *Sturmabteilung* (S.A., Storm Troopers), a grassroots organization, helped Hitler undermine the German democracy. The Gestapo (*Geheime Staatspolizei*, Secret State Police), a force recruited from professional police officers, was given complete freedom to arrest anyone after February 28. The *Schutzstaffel* (SS, Protection Squad) served as Hitler's personal bodyguard and eventually controlled the concentration camps and the Gestapo. The *Sicherheitsdienst des ReichsführersSS* (S.D., Security Service of the SS) functioned as the Nazis' intelligence service, uncovering enemies and keeping them under surveillance.

With this police infrastructure in place, opponents of the Nazis were terrorized, beaten, or sent to one of the concentration camps the Germans built to incarcerate them. Dachau, just outside of Munich, was the first such camp built for political prisoners. Dachau's purpose changed over time and eventually became another brutal concentration camp for Jews.

By the end of 1934 Hitler was in absolute control of Germany, and his campaign against the Jews in full swing. The Nazis claimed the Jews corrupted pure German culture with their "foreign" and "mongrel" influence. They portrayed the Jews as evil and cowardly, and Germans as hardworking, courageous, and honest. The Jews, the Nazis claimed, who were heavily represented in finance, commerce, the press, literature, theater, and the arts, had weakened Germany's economy and culture. The massive government-supported propaganda machine created a racial anti-Semitism, which was different from the long-standing anti-Semitic tradition of the Christian churches.

The superior race was the "Aryans," the Germans. The word Aryan, "derived from the study of linguistics, which started in the eighteenth century and at some point determined that the Indo-Germanic (also known as Aryan) languages were superior in their structures, variety, and vocabulary to the Semitic languages that had evolved in the Near East. This judgment led to a certain conjecture about the character of the peoples who spoke these languages; the conclusion was that the 'Aryan' peoples were likewise superior

to the 'Semitic' ones" (Leni Yahil, *The Holocaust: The Fate of European Jewry*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 36).

The Jews Are Isolated from Society

The Nazis then combined their racial theories with the evolutionary theories of Charles Darwin to justify their treatment of the Jews. The Germans, as the strongest and fittest, were destined to rule, while the weak and racially adulterated Jews were doomed to extinction. Hitler began to restrict the Jews with legislation and terror, which entailed burning books written by Jews, removing Jews from their professions and public schools, confiscating their businesses and property and excluding them from public events. The most infamous of the anti-Jewish legislation were the Nuremberg Laws, enacted on September 15, 1935. They formed the legal basis for the Jews' exclusion from German society and the progressively restrictive Jewish policies of the Germans.

Many Jews attempted to flee Germany, and thousands succeeded by immigrating to such countries as Belgium, Czechoslovakia, England, France and Holland. It was much more difficult to get out of Europe. Jews encountered stiff immigration quotas in most of the world's countries. Even if they obtained the necessary documents, they often had to wait months or years before leaving. Many families out of desperation sent their children first.

In July 1938, representatives of 32 countries met in the French town of Evian to discuss the refugee and immigration problems created by the Nazis in Germany. Nothing substantial was done or decided at the Evian Conference, and it became apparent to Hitler that no one wanted the Jews and that he would not meet resistance in instituting his Jewish policies. By the autumn of 1941, Europe was in effect sealed to most legal emigration. The Jews were trapped.

On November 9, 1938, the attacks on the Jews became violent. Hershel Grynszpan, a 17-year-old Jewish boy distraught at the deportation of his family, shot Ernst vom Rath, the third secretary in the German Embassy in Paris, who died on November 9. Nazi hooligans used this assassination as the pretext for instigating a night of destruction that is now known as Kristallnacht (the night of broken glass). They looted and destroyed Jewish homes and businesses and burned synagogues. Many Jews were beaten and killed; 30,000 Jews were arrested and sent to concentration camps.

The Jews Are Confined to Ghettos

Germany invaded Poland in September 1939, beginning World War II. Soon after, in 1940, the Nazis began establishing ghettos for the Jews of Poland. More than 10 percent of the Polish population was Jewish, numbering about three million. Jews were forcibly deported from their homes to live in crowded ghettos, isolated from the rest of society. This concentration of the Jewish population later aided the Nazis in their deportation of the Jews to the death camps. The ghettos lacked the necessary food, water, space, and sanitary facilities required by so many people living within their constricted boundaries. Many died of deprivation and starvation.

The "Final Solution"

In June 1941 Germany attacked the Soviet Union and began the "Final Solution." Four mobile killing groups were formed called *Einsatzgruppen* A, B, C and D. Each group contained several commando units. The *Einsatzgruppen* gathered Jews town by town, marched them to huge pits dug earlier, stripped them, lined them up, and shot them with automatic weapons. The dead and dying would fall into the pits to be buried in mass graves. In the infamous Babi Yar massacre, near Kiev, 30,000-35,000 Jews were killed in two days. In addition to their operations in the Soviet Union, the *Einsatzgruppen* conducted mass murder in eastern Poland, Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia. It is estimated that by the end of 1942, the *Einsatzgruppen* had murdered more than 1.3 million Jews.

On January 20, 1942, several top officials of the German government met to officially coordinate the military and civilian administrative branches of the Nazi system to organize a system of mass murder of the Jews. This meeting, called the Wannsee Conference, "marked the beginning of the full-scale, comprehensive extermination operation [of the Jews] and laid the foundations for its organization, which started immediately after the conference ended" (Yahil, *The Holocaust*, p. 318).

While the Nazis murdered other national and ethnic groups, such as a number of Soviet prisoners of war, Polish intellectuals, and gypsies, only the Jews were marked for systematic and total annihilation. Jews were singled out for "Special Treatment" (*Sonderbehandlung*), which meant that Jewish men, women and children were to be methodically killed with poisonous gas. In the exacting records kept at the Auschwitz death camp, the cause of death of Jews who had been gassed was indicated by "SB," the first letters of the two words that form the German term for "Special Treatment."

By the spring of 1942, the Nazis had established six killing centers (death camps) in Poland: Chelmno (Kulmhof), Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka, Maidanek and Auschwitz. All were located near railway lines so that Jews could be easily transported daily. A vast system of camps (called *Lagersystem*) supported the death camps. The purpose of these camps varied: some were slave labor camps, some transit camps, others concentration camps and their subcamps, and still others the notorious death camps. Some camps combined all of these functions or a few of them. All the camps were intolerably brutal.

The major concentration camps were Ravensbruck, Neuengamme, Bergen-Belsen, Sachsenhausen, Gross-Rosen, Buchenwald, Theresienstadt, Flossenburg, Natzweiler-Struthof, Dachau, Mauthausen, Stutthof, and Dora/Nordhausen.

In nearly every country overrun by the Nazis, the Jews were forced to wear badges marking them as Jews, they were rounded up into ghettos or concentration camps and then gradually transported to the killing centers. The death camps were essentially factories for murdering Jews. The Germans shipped thousands of Jews to them each day. Within a few hours of their arrival, the Jews had been stripped of their possessions and valuables, gassed to death, and their bodies burned in specially designed crematoriums. Approximately 3.5 million Jews were murdered in these death camps.

Many healthy, young strong Jews were not killed immediately. The Germans' war effort and the "Final Solution" required a great deal of manpower, so the Germans reserved large pools of Jews for slave labor. These people, imprisoned in concentration and labor camps, were forced to work in German munitions and other factories, such as I.G. Farben and Krupps, and wherever the Nazis needed laborers. They were worked from dawn until dark without adequate food and shelter. Thousands perished, literally worked to death by the Germans and their collaborators.

In the last months of Hitler's Reich, as the German armies retreated, the Nazis began marching the prisoners still alive in the concentration camps to the territory they still controlled. The Germans forced the starving and sick Jews to walk hundreds of miles. Most died or were shot along the way. About a quarter of a million Jews died on the death marches.

Jewish Resistance

The Germans' overwhelming repression and the presence of many collaborators in the various local populations severely limited the ability of the Jews to resist. Jewish resistance did occur, however, in several forms. Staying alive, clean, and observing Jewish religious traditions constituted resistance under the dehumanizing conditions imposed by the Nazis. Other forms of resistance involved escape attempts from the ghettos and camps. Many who succeeded in escaping the ghettos lived in the forests and mountains in family camps and in fighting partisan units. Once free, though, the Jews had to contend with local residents and partisan groups who were often openly hostile. Jews also staged armed revolts in the ghettos of Vilna, Bialystok, Bedzin-Sosnowiec, Cracow, and Warsaw.

The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was the largest ghetto revolt. Massive deportations (or *Aktions*) had been held in the ghetto from July to September 1942, emptying the ghetto of the majority of Jews imprisoned there. When the Germans entered the ghetto again in January 1943 to remove several thousand more, small unorganized groups of Jews attacked them. After four days, the Germans withdrew from the ghetto, having deported far fewer people than they had intended. The Nazis reentered the ghetto on April 19, 1943, the eve of Passover, to evacuate the remaining Jews and close the ghetto. The Jews, using homemade bombs and stolen or bartered weapons, resisted and withstood the Germans for 27 days. They fought from bunkers and sewers and evaded capture until the Germans burned the ghetto building by building. By May 16 the ghetto was in ruins and the uprising crushed.

Jews also revolted in the death camps of Sobibor, Treblinka and Auschwitz. All of these acts of resistance were largely unsuccessful in the face of the superior German forces, but they were very important spiritually, giving the Jews hope that one day the Nazis would be defeated.

Liberation and the End of War

The camps were liberated gradually, as the Allies advanced on the German army. For example, Maidanek (near Lublin, Poland) was liberated by Soviet forces in July 1944, Auschwitz in January 1945 by the Soviets, Bergen-Belsen (near Hanover, Germany) by the British in April 1945, and Dachau by the Americans in April 1945.

At the end of the war, between 50,000 and 100,000 Jewish survivors were living in three zones of occupation: American, British and Soviet. Within a year, that figure grew to about 200,000. The American zone of occupation contained more than 90 percent of the Jewish displaced persons (DPs). The Jewish DPs would not and could not return to their homes, which brought back such horrible memories and still held the threat of danger from anti-Semitic neighbors. Thus, they languished in DP camps until emigration could be arranged to Palestine, and later Israel, the United States, South America and other countries. The last DP camp closed in 1957 (David S. Wyman, "The United States," in David S. Wyman, ed., *The World Reacts to the Holocaust*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996, pp. 70710).

Below are figures for the number of Jews murdered in each country that came under German domination. They are estimates, as are all figures relating to Holocaust victims. The numbers given here for Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Romania are based on their territorial borders before the 1938 Munich agreement. The total number of six million Jews murdered during the Holocaust, which emerged from the Nuremberg trials, is also an estimate. Numbers have ranged between five and seven million killed.

Africa	526
Albania	200
Austria	65,000
Belgium	24,387
Czechoslovakia	277,000
Denmark	77
Estonia	4,000
France	83,000
Germany	160,000