
HISTORY OF THE HOLOCAUST: AN OVERVIEW

On January 20, 1942, an extraordinary 90-minute meeting took place in a lakeside villa in the wealthy Wannsee district of Berlin. Fifteen high-ranking Nazi party and German government leaders gathered to coordinate logistics for carrying out “the final solution of the Jewish question.” Chairing the meeting was SS Lieutenant General Reinhard Heydrich, head of the powerful Reich Security Main Office, a central police agency that included the Secret State Police (the Gestapo). Heydrich convened the meeting on the basis of a memorandum he had received six months earlier from Adolf Hitler’s deputy, Hermann Göring, confirming his authorization to implement the “Final Solution.”

The “Final Solution” was the Nazi regime’s code name for the deliberate, planned mass murder of all European Jews. During the Wannsee meeting German government officials discussed “extermination” without hesitation or qualm. Heydrich calculated that 11 million European Jews from more than 20 countries would be killed under this heinous plan.

During the months before the Wannsee Conference, special units made up of SS, the elite guard of the Nazi state, and police personnel, known as *Einsatzgruppen*, slaughtered Jews in mass shootings on the territory of the Soviet Union that the Germans had occupied. Six weeks before the Wannsee meeting, the Nazis began to murder Jews at Chelmno, an agricultural estate located in that part of Poland annexed to Germany. Here SS and police personnel used sealed vans into which they pumped carbon monoxide gas to suffocate their victims. The Wannsee meeting served to sanction, coordinate, and expand the implementation of the “Final Solution” as state policy.

During 1942, trainload after trainload of Jewish men, women, and children were transported from countries all over Europe to Auschwitz, Treblinka, and four other major killing centers in German-occupied Poland. By year’s end, about 4 million Jews were dead. During World War II (1939–1945), the Germans and their collaborators killed or caused the deaths of up to 6 million Jews. Hundreds of Jewish communities in Europe, some centuries old, disappeared forever. To convey the unimaginable, devastating scale of destruction, postwar writers referred to the murder of the European Jews as the “Holocaust.”

Centuries of religious prejudice against Jews in Christian Europe, reinforced by modern political antisemitism developing from a complex mixture of extreme nationalism, financial insecurity, fear of communism, and so-called race science, provide the backdrop for the Holocaust. Hitler and other Nazi ideologues regarded Jews as a dangerous “race” whose very existence threatened the biological purity and strength of the “superior Aryan race.” To secure the assistance of thousands of individuals to implement the “Final Solution,” the Nazi regime could and did exploit existing prejudice against Jews in Germany and the other countries that were conquered by or allied with Germany during World War II.

“While not all victims were Jews, all Jews were victims,” Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel has written. “Jews were destined for annihilation solely because they were born Jewish. They were doomed not because of something they had done or proclaimed or acquired but because of who they were, sons and daughters of Jewish people. As such they were sentenced to death collectively and individually...”

SUMMARY OF THE HISTORY OF THE HOLOCAUST IN TWO MAIN SECTIONS: 1933–1939 AND 1939–1945

1933–1939

On January 30, 1933, Adolf Hitler was named chancellor, the most powerful position in the German government, by the aged President Hindenburg, who hoped Hitler could lead the nation out of its grave political and economic crisis. Hitler was the leader of the right-wing National Socialist German Workers Party (called the “Nazi party” for short). It was, by 1933, one of the strongest parties in Germany, even though—reflecting the country’s multiparty system—the Nazis had won only a plurality of 33 percent of the votes in the 1932 elections to the German parliament (Reichstag).

Once in power, Hitler moved quickly to end German democracy. He convinced his cabinet to invoke emergency clauses of the constitution that permitted the suspension of individual freedoms of press, speech, and assembly. Special security forces—the Gestapo, the Storm Troopers (SA), and the SS—murdered or arrested leaders of opposition political parties (Communists, socialists, and liberals). The Enabling Act of March 23, 1933—forced through a Reichstag already purged of many political opponents—gave dictatorial powers to Hitler.

Also in 1933, the Nazis began to put into practice their racial ideology. The Nazis believed that the Germans were “racially superior” and that there was a struggle for survival between them and “inferior races.” They saw Jews, Roma (Gypsies), and the handicapped as a serious biological threat to the purity of the “German (Aryan) Race,” what they called the “master race.”

Jews, who numbered about 525,000 in Germany (less than one percent of the total population in 1933), were the principal target of Nazi hatred. The Nazis identified Jews as a race and defined this race as “inferior.” They also spewed hate-mongering propaganda that unfairly blamed Jews for Germany’s economic depression and the country’s defeat in World War I (1914–18).

1 The term “Aryan” originally referred to peoples speaking Indo-European languages. The Nazis perverted its meaning to support racist ideas by viewing those of Germanic background as prime examples of Aryan stock, which they considered racially superior. For the Nazis, the typical Aryan was blond, blue-eyed, and tall.

In 1933, new German laws forced Jews out of their civil service jobs, university and law court positions, and other areas of public life. In April 1933, a boycott of Jewish businesses was instituted. In 1935, laws proclaimed at Nuremberg made Jews second-class citizens. These Nuremberg Laws defined Jews, not by their religion or by how they wanted to identify themselves, but by the religious affiliation of their grandparents. Between 1937 and 1939, new anti-Jewish regulations segregated Jews further and made daily life very difficult for them: Jews could not attend public schools; go to theaters, cinemas, or vacation resorts; or reside or even walk in certain sections of German cities.

Also between 1937 and 1939, Jews increasingly were forced from Germany's economic life: The Nazis either seized Jewish businesses and properties outright or forced Jews to sell them at bargain prices. In November 1938, the Nazis organized a riot (pogrom), known as *Kristallnacht* (the "Night of Broken Glass"). This attack against German and Austrian Jews included the physical destruction of synagogues and Jewish-owned stores, the arrest of Jewish men, the vandalization of homes, and the murder of individuals.

Although Jews were the main target of Nazi hatred, the Nazis persecuted other groups they viewed as racially or genetically "inferior." Nazi racial ideology was buttressed by scientists who advocated "selective breeding" (eugenics) to "improve" the human race. Laws passed between 1933 and 1935 aimed to reduce the future number of genetic "inferiors" through involuntary sterilization programs: 320,000 to 350,000 individuals judged physically or mentally handicapped were subjected to surgical or radiation procedures so they could not have children. Supporters of sterilization also argued that the handicapped burdened the community with the costs of their care. Many of Germany's 30,000 Roma (Gypsies) were also eventually sterilized and prohibited, along with Blacks, from intermarrying with Germans. About 500 children of mixed African-German backgrounds were also sterilized.² New laws combined traditional prejudices with the racism of the Nazis, which defined Roma, by "race," as "criminal and asocial."

Another consequence of Hitler's ruthless dictatorship in the 1930s was the arrest of political opponents and trade unionists and others the Nazis labeled "undesirables" and "enemies of the state." Some 5,000 to 15,000 homosexuals were imprisoned in concentration camps; under the 1935 Nazi-revised criminal code, the mere denunciation of a man as "homosexual" could result in arrest, trial, and conviction. Jehovah's Witnesses, who numbered at least 25,000 in Germany, were banned as an organization as early as April 1933, because the beliefs of this religious group prohibited them from swearing any oath to the state or serving in the German military. Their literature was confiscated, and they lost jobs, unemployment benefits, pensions, and all social welfare benefits. Many Witnesses were sent to prisons and concentration camps in Nazi Germany, and their children were sent to juvenile detention homes and orphanages.

² These children, called "the Rhineland bastards" by Germans, were the offspring of German women and African soldiers from French colonies who were stationed in the 1920s in the Rhineland, a demilitarized zone the Allies established after World War I as a buffer between Germany and western Europe.

Between 1933 and 1936, thousands of people, mostly political prisoners, were imprisoned in concentration camps, while several thousand German Roma (Gypsies) were confined in special municipal camps. The first systematic roundups of German and Austrian³ Jews occurred after *Kristallnacht*, when approximately 30,000 Jewish men were deported to Dachau and other concentration camps, and several hundred Jewish women were sent to local jails. The wave of arrests in 1938 also included several thousand German and Austrian Roma (Gypsies).

Between 1933 and 1939, about half the German-Jewish population and more than two-thirds of Austrian Jews (1938–39) fled Nazi persecution. They emigrated mainly to the United States, Palestine, elsewhere in Europe (where many would be later trapped by Nazi conquests during the war), Latin America, and Japanese-occupied Shanghai (which required no visas for entry). Jews who remained under Nazi rule were either unwilling to uproot themselves or unable to obtain visas, sponsors in host countries, or funds for emigration. Most foreign countries, including the United States, Canada, Britain, and France, were unwilling to admit very large numbers of refugees.

1939–1945

On September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland and World War II began. Within weeks, the Polish army was defeated, and the Nazis began their campaign to destroy Polish culture and enslave the Polish people, whom they viewed as “subhuman.” Killing Polish leaders was the first step: German soldiers carried out massacres of university professors, artists, writers, politicians, and many Catholic priests. To create new living space for the “superior Germanic race,” large segments of the Polish population were resettled, and German families moved into the emptied lands. Other Poles, including many Jews, were imprisoned in concentration camps. The Nazis also “kidnapped” as many as 50,000 “Aryan-looking” Polish children from their parents and took them to Germany to be adopted by German families. Many of these children were later rejected as not capable of Germanization and were sent to special children’s camps where some died of starvation, lethal injection, and disease.

As the war began in 1939, Hitler initialed an order to kill institutionalized, handicapped patients deemed “incurable.” Special commissions of physicians reviewed questionnaires filled out by all state hospitals and then decided if a patient should be killed. The doomed were then transferred to six institutions in Germany and Austria where specially constructed gas chambers were used to kill them. After public protests in 1941, the Nazi leadership continued this “euthanasia” program in secret. Babies, small children, and other victims were thereafter killed by lethal injection and pills and by forced starvation.

3 On March 11, 1938, Hitler sent his army into Austria, and on March 13, the incorporation (Anschluss) of Austria with the German empire (Reich) was proclaimed in Vienna. Most of the population welcomed the Anschluss and expressed their fervor in widespread riots and attacks against the Austrian Jews numbering 180,000 (90 percent of whom lived in Vienna).

The “euthanasia” program contained all the elements later required for mass murder of European Jews and Roma (Gypsies): a decision to kill, specially trained personnel, the apparatus for killing by gas, and the use of euphemistic language like “euthanasia” that psychologically distanced the murderers from their victims and hid the criminal character of the killings from the public.

In 1940 German forces continued their conquest of much of Europe, easily defeating Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, France, Yugoslavia, and Greece. On June 22, 1941, the German army invaded the Soviet Union and by late November was approaching Moscow. In the meantime, Italy, Romania, and Hungary had joined the Axis powers led by Germany and were opposed by the main Allied powers (British Commonwealth, Free France, the United States, and the Soviet Union).

In the months following Germany’s invasion of the Soviet Union, Jews, political leaders, Communists, and many Roma (Gypsies) were killed in mass shootings. Most of those killed were Jews. These murders were carried out at improvised sites throughout the Soviet Union by members of mobile killing squads (*Einsatzgruppen*) who followed in the wake of the invading German army. The most famous of these sites was Babi Yar, near Kiev, where an estimated 33,000 persons, mostly Jews, were murdered over two days. German terror extended to institutionalized handicapped and psychiatric patients in the Soviet Union; it also resulted in the death of more than 3 million Soviet prisoners of war.

World War II brought major changes to the concentration camp system. Large numbers of new prisoners, deported from all German-occupied countries, now flooded the camps. Often entire groups were committed to the camps, such as members of underground resistance organizations who were rounded up in a sweep across western Europe under the 1941 Night and Fog decree. To accommodate the massive increase in the number of prisoners, hundreds of new camps were established in occupied territories of eastern and western Europe.

During the war, ghettos, transit camps, and forced-labor camps, in addition to the concentration camps, were created by the Germans and their collaborators to imprison Jews, Roma (Gypsies), and other victims of racial and ethnic hatred as well as political opponents and resistance fighters. Following the invasion of Poland, 3 million Polish Jews were forced into approximately 400 newly established ghettos where they were segregated from the rest of the population. Large numbers of Jews also were deported from other cities and countries, including Germany, to ghettos and camps in Poland and German-occupied territories further east.

In Polish cities under Nazi occupation, like Warsaw and Lodz, Jews were confined in sealed ghettos where starvation, overcrowding, exposure to cold, and contagious diseases killed tens of thousands of people. In Warsaw and elsewhere, ghettoized Jews made every effort, often at great risk, to maintain their cultural, communal, and religious lives. The ghettos also provided a forced-labor pool for the Germans, and many forced laborers (who worked on road gangs, in construction, or at other hard labor related to the German war effort) died from exhaustion or maltreatment.

Between 1942 and 1944, the Germans moved to eliminate the ghettos in occupied Poland and elsewhere, deporting ghetto residents to “extermination camps”—killing centers equipped with gassing facilities—located in Poland. After the meeting of senior German government officials in late January 1942. After the meeting in late January 1942 at a villa in the Berlin suburb of Wannsee informing senior German government officials of the decision to implement “the final solution of the Jewish question,” Jews from western Europe also were sent to killing centers in the East.

The six killing sites, chosen because of their closeness to rail lines and their location in semirural areas, were at Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka, Chelmno, Majdanek,⁴ and Auschwitz-Birkenau. Chelmno was the first camp in which mass executions were carried out by gas piped into mobile gas vans; at least 152,000 persons were killed there between December 1941 and March 1943, and between June and July 1944. A killing center using gas chambers operated at Belzec, where about 600,000 persons were killed between May 1942 and August 1943. Sobibor opened in May 1942 and closed following a rebellion of the prisoners on October 14, 1943; about 250,000 persons had already been killed by gassing at Sobibor. Treblinka opened in July 1942 and closed in November 1943; a revolt by the prisoners in early August 1943 destroyed much of that facility. At least 750,000 persons were killed at Treblinka, physically the largest of the killing centers. Almost all of the victims at Chelmno, Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka were Jews; a few were Roma (Gypsies), Poles, and Soviet POWs. Very few individuals survived these four killing centers where most victims were murdered immediately upon arrival.

Auschwitz-Birkenau, which also served as a concentration camp and slave labor camp, became the killing center where the largest numbers of European Jews and Roma (Gypsies) were killed. After an experimental gassing there in September 1941—of 250 malnourished and ill Polish prisoners and 600 Soviet POWs—mass murder became a daily routine; more than 1 million people were killed at Auschwitz-Birkenau, 9 out of 10 of them Jews. In addition, Roma, Soviet POWs, and ill prisoners of all nationalities died in the gas chambers there. Between May 15 and July 9, 1944, nearly 440,000 Jews were deported from Hungary in more than 140 trains, overwhelmingly to Auschwitz. This was probably the largest single mass deportation during the Holocaust. A similar system was implemented at Majdanek, which also doubled as a concentration camp, and where between 170,000 and 235,000 persons were killed in the gas chambers or died from malnutrition, brutality, and disease.

The methods of murder were similar in the killing centers, which were operated by the SS. Jewish victims arrived in railroad freight cars and passenger trains, mostly from ghettos and camps in occupied Poland, but also from almost every other eastern and western European country. On arrival, men were separated from women and children. Prisoners were forced to undress and hand over all valuables. They were then forced naked into the gas chambers, which were disguised as shower rooms, and either carbon monoxide or Zyklon B (a form of crystalline prussic acid, also used as an insecticide in some camps) was used to asphyxiate them. The minority selected for forced labor were,

4 Despite concerns among some historians that, operationally, Majdanek resembled concentration camps more than it did killing centers, most scholars include it among the killing centers because of the large number of prisoners who died there and the use of poison gas in the killing process.

after initial quarantine, vulnerable to malnutrition, exposure, epidemics, medical experiments, and brutality; many perished as a result.

The Germans carried out their systematic murderous activities with the active help of local collaborators in many countries and the acquiescence or indifference of millions of bystanders. However, there were instances of organized resistance. For example, in the fall of 1943, the Danish resistance, with the support of the local population, rescued nearly the entire Jewish community in Denmark by smuggling them via a dramatic boatlift to safety in neutral Sweden. Individuals in many other countries also risked their lives to save Jews and other individuals subject to Nazi persecution. One of the most famous was Raoul Wallenberg, a Swedish diplomat who played a significant role in some of the rescue efforts that saved the lives of tens of thousands of Hungarian Jews in 1944.

Resistance existed in almost every concentration camp and ghetto of Europe. In addition to the armed revolts at Sobibor and Treblinka, Jewish resistance in the Warsaw ghetto led to a courageous uprising in April and May 1943, despite a predictable doomed outcome because of superior German force. In general, rescue or aid to Holocaust victims was not a priority of resistance organizations, whose principal goal was to fight the war against the Germans. Nonetheless, such groups and Jewish partisans (resistance fighters) sometimes cooperated with each other to save Jews. On April 19, 1943, for instance, members of the National Committee for the Defense of Jews, in cooperation with Christian railroad workers and the general underground in Belgium, attacked a train leaving the Belgian transit camp of Malines headed for Auschwitz and succeeded in assisting Jewish deportees to escape.

The U.S. government did not pursue a policy of rescue for victims of Nazism during World War II. Like their British counterparts, U.S. political and military leaders argued that winning the war was the top priority and would bring an end to Nazi terror. Once the war began, security concerns, reinforced in part by antisemitism, influenced the U.S. State Department (led by Secretary of State Cordell Hull) and the U.S. government to do little to ease restrictions on entry visas. In January 1944, President Roosevelt established the War Refugee Board within the U.S. Treasury Department to facilitate the rescue of imperiled refugees. Fort Ontario in Oswego, New York, began to serve as an ostensibly free port for refugees from the territories liberated by the Allies.

After the war turned against Germany, and the Allied armies approached German soil in late 1944, the SS decided to evacuate outlying concentration camps. The Germans tried to cover up the evidence of genocide and deported prisoners to camps inside Germany to prevent their liberation. Many inmates died during the long journeys on foot known as “death marches.” During the final days, in the spring of 1945, conditions in the remaining concentration camps exacted a terrible toll in human lives. Even concentration camps such as Bergen-Belsen, never intended for extermination, became death traps for thousands, including Anne Frank, who died there of typhus in March 1945. In May 1945, Nazi Germany collapsed, the SS guards fled, and the camps ceased to exist.

AFTERMATH OF THE HOLOCAUST

The Allied victors of World War II (Great Britain, France, the United States, and the Soviet Union) faced two immediate problems following the surrender of Nazi Germany in May 1945: to bring Nazi war criminals to justice and to provide for displaced persons (DPs) and refugees stranded in Allied-occupied Germany and Austria.

Following the war, the best-known war crimes trial was the trial of “major” war criminals, held at the Palace of Justice in Nuremberg, Germany, between November 1945 and August 1946. Under the auspices of the International Military Tribunal (IMT), which consisted of prosecutors and judges from the four occupying powers (Great Britain, France, the Soviet Union, and the United States), leading officials of the Nazi regime were prosecuted for war crimes. The IMT sentenced 13 of those convicted to death. Seven more defendants were sentenced to life imprisonment or to prison terms ranging from 10 to 20 years. One defendant committed suicide before the trial began. Three of the defendants were acquitted. The judges also found three of six Nazi organizations (the SS, the Gestapo-SD, and the Leadership Corps of the Nazi Party) to be criminal organizations.

In the three years following this major trial, 12 subsequent trials were conducted under the auspices of the IMT but before U.S. military tribunals. The proceedings were directed at the prosecution of second- and third-ranking officials of the Nazi regime. They included concentration camp administrators; commanders of the *Einsatzgruppen* (mobile killing units); physicians and public health officials; the SS leadership; German army field commanders and staff officers; officials in the justice, interior, and foreign ministries; and senior administrators of industrial concerns that used concentration camp laborers, including I. G. Farben and the Flick concern.

In addition, each occupying power (Great Britain, France, the United States, and the Soviet Union) conducted trials of Nazi offenders captured in its respective zone of occupation or accused of crimes perpetrated in that zone of occupation. The U.S. military authorities conducted the trials in the American zone at the site of the Nazi concentration camp Dachau. In general, the defendants in these trials were the staff and guard units at concentration camps and other camps located in the zone and people accused of crimes against Allied military and civilian personnel.

Those German officials and collaborators who committed crimes within a specific location or country were generally returned to the nation on whose territory the crimes were committed and were tried by national tribunals. Perhaps the most famous of these cases was the trial in 1947, in Cracow, Poland, of Rudolf Höss, the commandant of Auschwitz. Trials of German war criminals and their collaborators were conducted during the late 1940s and early 1950s in Poland, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, and the Soviet Union. After the establishment of West Germany in 1949, many former Nazis received relatively lenient treatment by the courts. Courts in West Germany ruled the offenders were not guilty because they were obeying orders from their superior officers. Some Nazi criminals were acquitted and returned to normal lives in German society, a number of them taking jobs in the business world. Many war criminals, however, were never brought to trial or punished. In 1958, the Federal Republic of Germany established a Central Agency for the

Investigation of National Socialist Violent Crimes to streamline the investigation of Nazi offenders living in West Germany. These efforts, which continue to this day, led to some significant proceedings such as the Frankfurt Trial of Auschwitz camp personnel in the 1960s. The investigation of Nazi offenders residing in the United States began in earnest during the late 1970s and continues to this day.

Even as the Allies moved to bring Nazi offenders to justice, the looming refugee crisis threatened to overwhelm the resources of the Allied powers. During World War II, the Nazis uprooted millions of people. Within months of Germany's surrender in May 1945, the Allies repatriated more than 6 million (DPs) to their home countries.

Some 250,000 Jewish DPs, including most of the Jewish survivors of concentration camps, were unable or unwilling to return to Eastern Europe because of postwar antisemitism and the destruction of their communities during the Holocaust. Many of those who did return feared for their lives. Many Holocaust survivors found themselves in territory liberated by the Anglo-American armies and were housed in DP camps that the Allies established in Germany, Austria, and Italy. They were joined by a flow of refugees, including Holocaust survivors, migrating from points of liberation in Eastern Europe and the Soviet-occupied zones of Germany and Austria.

Most Jewish DPs hoped to leave Europe for Palestine or the United States, but the United States was still governed by severely restrictive immigration legislation, and the British, who administered Palestine under a mandate from the defunct League of Nations, severely restricted Jewish immigration for fear of antagonizing the Arab residents of the Mandate. Other countries had closed their borders to immigration during the Depression and during the war. Despite these obstacles, many Jewish DPs were eager to leave Europe as soon as possible.

The Jewish Brigade Group, formed as a unit within the British army in late 1944, worked with former partisans to help organize the *Beraha* (literally, "escape"), the exodus of Jewish refugees across closed borders from inside Europe to the coast in an attempt to sail for Palestine. However, the British intercepted most of the ships. In 1947, for example, the British stopped the *Exodus 1947* at the port of Haifa. The ship had 4,500 Holocaust survivors on board, who were forcibly returned on British vessels to Germany.

In the following years, the postwar Jewish refugee crisis eased. In 1948, the U.S. Congress passed the Displaced Persons Act, which provided up to 400,000 special visas for DPs uprooted by the Nazi or Soviet regimes. Some 63,000 of these visas were issued to Jews under the DP Act. When the DP Act expired in 1952, it was followed by a Refugee Relief Act that remained in force until the end of 1956. Moreover, in May 1948, the State of Israel became an independent nation after the United Nations voted to partition Palestine into a Jewish state and an Arab state. Israel quickly moved to legalize the flow of Jewish immigrants into the new state, passing legislation providing for unlimited Jewish immigration to the Jewish homeland. The last DP camp closed in Germany in 1957.

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A Jewish girl from Vienna sits on a staircase after her arrival in England. Nearly 10,000 children found refuge in England in what was called the Kindertransport. (December 12, 1938)

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