

Foundational Facts

What was the Holocaust?

The Holocaust was the state-sponsored systematic persecution and annihilation of European Jewry by Nazi Germany and its collaborators.

a. *When did the Holocaust begin and end?*

The Holocaust refers to the period from January 30, 1933, when Hitler became Chancellor of Germany, to May 8, 1945 (V-E Day), the end of the Second World War in Europe.

b. *What does the word Holocaust mean?*

The word Holocaust comes from the ancient Greek: *olos* meaning "whole," and *kaustos*, or *kautos*, meaning "burnt." Originating as early as the fifth century B.C.E., the term can mean a sacrifice wholly consumed by fire or a great destruction of life, especially by fire.

While the word Holocaust, with the meaning of a burnt sacrificial offering, does not have a specifically religious connotation, it appeared widely in religious writings through the centuries, particularly in descriptions of pagan rituals involving burnt sacrifices. In secular writings, Holocaust most commonly came to mean "a complete or whole destruction."

c. *What does the word Shoah mean?*

By the late 1940s, Holocaust became a more specific term due to its use in Hebrew translations of the word *Shoah*. This Hebrew word, meaning "calamity" or "destruction," had been used throughout Jewish history to refer to assaults upon Jews, but by the 1940s it was frequently being applied to the Nazi murder of European Jewry.

d. *What is genocide?*

Genocide is the intentional destruction of a group of people based on ethnic, national, racial, or religious reasons. The term is a combination of the Greek word *γένος* meaning "race, people" with the Latin suffix *-caedo* meaning "act of killing." The term was first coined in 1944.

Where did the Holocaust occur?

The Holocaust affected people in every country in Europe. However, the Holocaust itself took place in Nazi-occupied countries across Europe. These countries included Poland, Czechoslovakia, Austria, Denmark, Norway, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, France, former Yugoslavia, and Greece. Victims of the Holocaust were primarily murdered in concentration camps and ghettos located in Poland, or in shooting operations in the Baltic states and the USSR (present-day Belarus, Ukraine, and Russia). Jews from other Nazi-occupied countries such as Romania, Croatia and Hungary were also persecuted by local military forces or were transported to concentration camps.

What does “The Final Solution” mean?

The term “Final Solution to the Jewish Question” refers to the Nazi plan to murder all the Jews of Europe. The term was codified at the Wannsee Conference (Berlin: January 20, 1942) where Nazi officials devised its implementation.

Thousands of Jews were murdered by the Nazis during the initial years of the Third Reich. The systematic murder of Jews, or the “Final Solution,” began as a result of the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 when the Nazis encountered large numbers of “Eastern” Jews. When mass shootings became inefficient, the establishment of killing centers or death camps became the mechanism to carry out the Final Solution.

Who are Jews?

Being a Jew is about religion and culture. A Jew is a person who identifies as part of the cultural group whose traditional religion is Judaism.

The perpetrators of the Holocaust defined a Jew in an extremely racialized way. On November 14, 1935, the Nazis issued the following definition of a Jew:

- Three Jewish grandparents
- Two Jewish grandparents who belonged to the Jewish community on September 15, 1935, or joined thereafter
- Married to a Jew on September 15, 1935, or thereafter
- Offspring of a marriage or extramarital liaison with a Jew on or after September 15, 1935.

Those who were not classified as Jews but who had some Jewish ancestry were categorized as *mischlinge* (hybrids.) They were officially excluded from membership in the Nazi Party. Although they were drafted into the German Army, they could not attain the rank of officers. They were also barred from the civil service and from certain professions. During the Second World War, first-degree *mischlinge* were incarcerated in concentration camps and were deported to death camps. They were divided into two groups:

- Mischlinge of the first degree: two Jewish grandparents.
- Mischlinge of the second degree: one Jewish grandparent.

Who were the other victims of the Nazis?

People with mental and physical disabilities and Poles were also targeted for destruction or decimation for racial, ethnic, or national reasons. Millions more, including homosexuals, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Soviet prisoners of war, and political dissidents, also suffered grievous oppression and death under Nazi Germany.

The Nazis carried out a second, concurrent genocide during the Holocaust. This was against the Roma and Sinti (“Gypsy” people). This event is often termed *Samudaripen*, meaning the murder of all, or collective murder. Another term you might encounter when reading about the Roma genocide is *Porajmos*, literally meaning “devouring.”

Who were the perpetrators and why did so many people collaborate in the Holocaust?

The Holocaust was conceived of, developed, and executed by the Nazi-German regime led by Adolf Hitler. It was implemented in large part by officers of the Schutzstaffel, known as the SS. The SS were the elite guard of the Nazi regime that controlled the German state and the territories conquered by the Nazis. They were tasked with carrying out the Nazi ideological agenda in Germany and its conquered territories throughout

Europe. Civilian and organizational collaborators and accomplices from across Nazi-occupied Europe also helped to carry out the Nazis' agenda.

Who were the bystanders?

A bystander is a “witness to events,” or someone who is “present but not taking part in what is occurring.” During the Second World War, many German citizens and those in German-occupied countries knew what was happening to Jews across Europe but remained passive and indifferent. After the war, many claimed that they were “not involved” in the persecution of Jews and that they were merely “bystanders” to what happened during the Holocaust.

Despite knowing about violence against Jews since 1933, North American leaders did not call upon the local population in Europe to refrain from assisting the Nazis in their systematic murder of the Jews.

Why did the Holocaust happen and why were Jews targeted?

Hitler's ultimate goal in launching the Second World War and the Holocaust was the establishment of an Aryan empire from Germany to the Ural Mountains. He considered this area the natural territory of the German people, an area to which they were entitled by right, the Lebensraum (living space) for the Aryan race to preserve itself and assure its dominance. In the end, Hitler's program of war and genocide stemmed from what he saw as a hard equation of survival: “Aryan” Germans would have to expand and dominate, a process requiring the elimination of all racial threats - especially the Jews - or else they would face extinction themselves.

The explanation of the Nazis' hatred of Jews rests on their distorted world view which saw history as a racial struggle. They considered the Jews a race with the goal of world domination and who, therefore, were an obstruction to Aryan dominance. They considered it their duty to eliminate the threat of Jews.

There is no doubt that other factors contributed toward Nazi hatred of the Jews and their contrived image of the Jewish people. These included the centuries-old tradition of Christian antisemitism which propagated a negative stereotype of the Jew as a Christ-killer, agent of the devil, and practitioner of witchcraft. Also significant was the political antisemitism of the latter half of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth centuries, which singled out the Jew as a threat to the established order of society. These combined to paint the Jew as a target for persecution and ultimate destruction by the Nazis.

What is Antisemitism?

The word antisemitism means prejudice against or hatred of Jews. The Holocaust is history's most extreme example of antisemitism.

In 1879, German journalist Wilhelm Marr coined the term antisemitism, denoting the hatred of Jews, and also hatred of various liberal, cosmopolitan, and international political trends often associated with Jews. Among the most common manifestations of antisemitism throughout history were pogroms, violent riots launched against Jews and frequently encouraged by government authorities.

In the modern era, antisemites added a political dimension to their ideology of hatred. In the late nineteenth century, antisemitic political parties were formed in Germany, France, and Austria. Publications such as the Protocols of the Elders of Zion generated or provided support for fraudulent theories of an international Jewish conspiracy. A potent component of political antisemitism was nationalism, whose adherents often falsely denounced Jews as disloyal citizens.

The Nazi party, founded in 1919 and led by Adolf Hitler, gave political expression to quasi-scientific racial theories influenced by Darwinism. In part, the German Nazi party gained popularity in Germany and Austria by disseminating anti-Jewish propaganda. Millions bought Hitler's book, *Mein Kampf* (My Struggle – published in 1925), which called for the removal of Jews from Germany.

With the Nazi rise to power in 1933, the party ordered anti-Jewish economic boycotts, staged book burnings, and enacted discriminatory anti-Jewish legislation. In 1935, the Nuremberg Laws racially defined Jews by blood and ordered the total separation of so-called "Aryans" and "non-Aryans," thereby legalizing a racist hierarchy and denial of civil rights to Jews in Germany. The pogroms of Kristallnacht in Germany and Austria in November 1938 marked a transition to an era of destruction, in which genocide would become the singular focus of Nazi antisemitism.

What did the world know about the Holocaust while it was happening?

While the entire German population was not in agreement with Hitler's persecution of the Jews, there is no evidence of any large-scale protest regarding their treatment. Among German Christian clergy, the response was mixed. Some publicly protested the Nazi Euthanasia program but were silent on the treatment of Jews.

Though intelligence data and news reports revealed Nazi violence against Jews as early as 1933, and a dramatic increase in that violence in 1941, scholars generally agree that the United States government and the Allies did not receive reliable confirmation of the full scope of the Nazis' Final Solution until August 1942. However, no attempt was made to call upon the local population in Europe to refrain from assisting the Nazis in their systematic murder of the Jews.

The response of the Allies to the persecution and destruction of European Jewry was inadequate. Tens of thousands of Jews sought to enter the United States and Canada, but they were barred from doing so by stringent immigration policies. Even the relatively small quotas of visas which existed were often not filled, although the number of applicants was usually many times the number of available places. Only in January 1944 was an agency established for the express purpose of saving the victims of Nazi persecution. On December 17, 1942, The War Refugee Board issued a condemnation of Nazi atrocities against the Jews, but this was the only such declaration made prior to 1944.

Did anyone resist during Holocaust?

There were Germans and civilians in German-occupied countries who defied boycotts or aided Jews in escape and hiding, but their numbers were very low. Some supported Hitler for a variety of nationalist reasons while not necessarily advocating the Final Solution, and some opposed Hitler's leadership but were nevertheless in agreement with his anti-Jewish policies.

Many Jews also partook in spiritual and physical resistance against Nazi perpetrators. Spiritual resistance refers to attempts by individuals to maintain their humanity and core values in spite of Nazi dehumanization and degradation. In many instances, Jews in ghettos and camps continued observing religious traditions, provided schooling for the children, maintained cultural activities and communal life, and documented the experience in writing and art. Physical resistance refers to armed resistance. Despite difficult conditions, many Jews engaged in armed resistance against the Nazis in three basic types: ghetto revolts, resistance in concentration and death camps, and partisan warfare.

- Ghettos: The Warsaw Ghetto revolt, which began on April 19, 1943, is the best-known example of armed Jewish resistance, but there were many ghetto revolts in which Jews fought against the Nazis.
- Camps: Despite the terrible conditions in the death, concentration, and labour camps, Jewish inmates fought against the Nazis at the following sites: Treblinka (August 2, 1943); Babi Yar (September 29, 1943); Sobibor (October 14, 1943); Janowska (November 19, 1943); and Auschwitz (October 7, 1944).
- Partisans: Partisans were groups of organized guerilla fighters operating in enemy-occupied territory. The work of these fighters led to the rescue of an undetermined number of Jews, Nazi casualties, and damage to German property and moral.

Did anyone help the victims?

There are a small number of Germans and citizens in Nazi-occupied countries that tried to help Jews during the Holocaust, called the “Righteous among the Nations,” or “Righteous Gentiles.” Help came in many different forms. Some people defied laws and continued to sell goods to Jews or helped Jews to obtain illegal documentation papers while others hid Jews in their homes. This came with great risk because it was illegal to help Jews in any way and if caught, they would be arrested or even executed. There were Righteous Among the Nations in every country overrun or allied with the Nazis, and their deeds often led to the rescue of Jewish lives.

Yad Vashem, the Israeli national remembrance authority for the Holocaust, bestows special honors upon these individuals. By the end of 2010, Yad Vashem recognized 23,788 Righteous among the Nations from 45 countries. The figure is far from complete as many cases were never reported.

What happened to the perpetrators after the Holocaust?

After the end of the Second World War, many top-ranking Nazi perpetrators and collaborators were put on trial for the crimes that they committed during the Holocaust. While many of them were convicted, most of the perpetrators were set free in the 1950s. The majority of those who actively participated in the persecution of Jews did not pay for their crimes. Some changed their identities and fled Europe, but many were able to live their lives like they did before the war openly. Many people did not think that this was right, so they began to seek out perpetrators and bring them to trial for their crimes. Holocaust perpetrators are still being brought to trial for their war crimes to this day.

For more information about the Holocaust, take a look at these resources:

- “Facts About The Holocaust,” *World Jewish Congress*, <https://aboutholocaust.org/en>.
- “The Holocaust Encyclopedia,” *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/en>.