



Overview: The Holocaust

The Jews have existed as a distinct people for thousands of years and are comprised of various ethnicities and races. Despite this diversity, they share such cultural elements as a history and a religion. During some periods Jews have governed themselves, with the most noteworthy example being in ancient and modern Israel. However, for much of their history most Jews lived in forced exile from their ancient homeland in the Middle East. Although there are records of Jewish communities flourishing and getting along with their neighbors, Jews as a minority were also subject to the oftentimes harsh laws and whims of those ruling over them.

Prejudice and discrimination against Jews in Nazi Germany did not start overnight. The Bible contains accounts of attempted genocide by other ancient nations against Jews, whose religious beliefs and practices marked them as a people apart. Later, some influential Christian leaders tried to provide theological justification for persecuting Jews. In medieval Europe, Jews were falsely accused of spreading disease, murdering Christian children for ritual purposes, desecrating Christianity, and performing sorcery and other evils. As a people without their own state or army, Jews were especially vulnerable. Entire Jewish populations were killed by crusaders or pogroms, ordered to wear conspicuously marked clothing, exiled from kingdoms, or forced into ghettos. Even the Enlightenment, despite its goal to spread understanding and reason, was slow in changing the hated image of the Jew; in fact, some otherwise “Enlightened” thinkers tried to find new justifications for Jew-hatred. Yet the principles driving the American and French Revolutions started to reframe the Old World and slowly disseminated notions of universal rights and liberty. Jews emerged from the ghettos and found places in society. But resentment of the Jews came to endure in secular, not just religious, circles. Jews were still seen as problematic and different, even by people who never went to church.

In the 1870s the modern European preoccupation with defining and studying races brought to the forefront figures such as Wilhelm Marr, who popularized the term, “antisemitism,” and founded the League of Antisemites as the vanguard of an organized political movement to exile Jews from Germany, where they had lived since the early medieval period. Despite this threat, most German Jews were still able to assimilate and took pride in contributing to the nation. The Jewish population of Germany was far smaller than those in the countries of Eastern Europe, though. In the same century, the concept of “the survival of the fittest” influenced many scientists in North America and Europe, who were also intrigued by the prospect of studying race and genetics to end disease and other human suffering. Such ideas would later be perverted by the Nazi leadership as a basis for attacking Jews and others.

In an era that saw the reemergence of various antisemitic theories, World War I was often viewed, especially by its losers, as the result of a plot by Jews supposedly set on destroying Germany with a “stab in the back.” Germany had lost millions of people, money, and territories, and was now forbidden from unification with Austria. The Weimar Republic was ill-equipped to help Germans through tough times. In 1933, as other political parties attacked one another and the Depression persisted, a large segment (but not the majority) of Germans voted for Hitler’s



Overview: The Holocaust

Nazi Party. Numerous reasons explain this vote: the lost war and territories, shame, hunger, inflation, despair, resentment over foreign immigrants from the East, desire for a strong leader, and Hitler's personal charisma. The Nazis thus took control and vowed to improve German finances and preserve the alleged racial purity of Germanic, or "Aryan," blood. The Nazis pointed to the diabolical stereotype of the Jews in arguing that they were responsible for the country's troubles before, during, and since WWI. The Nazis even contended that all the world's evils could be traced to alleged conspiracies and inferior genetics of all Jews. This hateful message gained widespread public approval.

While the Nazis saw Jewry as the ultimate evil to be eliminated in the world, they also targeted other groups. Nazi tactics included framing communists for arson, secretly murdering the handicapped, and relying on propaganda, miseducation, censorship, and total control of the legal system. The Reich's Nuremberg Laws revoked citizenship from every Jew and Roma ("gypsy"); prohibited intermarriage; and defined as Jewish anyone with more than two Jewish grandparents. That is, the law counted as Jewish even people who had never practiced Judaism, including some who considered themselves Christian or nonbelievers. Jewish-owned businesses were taken over by non-Jews, Jewish doctors were forbidden to treat non-Jews, Jewish lawyers could no longer practice, and Jewish professors and teachers were fired. Eventually, thousands of laws in the Reich singled out the Jews, who made up less than one per cent of the population and were now largely perceived as subhuman. Most Jews, including Albert Einstein and Anne Frank's family, tried to escape the increasingly hostile environment, but before long other countries refused to admit most of them.

The Nazis also reintroduced medieval methods of persecution. In 1936, Jews were ordered to affix to their clothes the Star of David. The 1938 Kristallnacht pogrom against the Jews included destruction of property, public beatings, mass arrests, and murders, and the victims were themselves fined for the crimes committed against them. Jews in the East were forced back into ghettos, facing death from unsanitary living conditions and insufficient food rations. But ghettos were provisional measures, to be used only until the Nazis decided to murder every Jew: this was to be the Reich's "Final Solution" to the old problem of what to do with the Jews. While the Nazis and their accomplices for years confiscated Jews' possessions, this was not the primary motivation for the mass murder. They simply wanted to rid the world of Jews and their culture. Nazism, which labeled certain people as "Life Unworthy of Life," was fundamentally incompatible with the Jewish system of ethics, particularly the biblical tenets that prohibited murder and called for compassion for the weak and vulnerable.

World War II started with the 1939 German invasion of Poland. When Germany attacked the Soviet Union in 1941, the SS paramilitary force dispatched *Einsatzgruppen*, or mobile killing units, to dispose of Jewish communities and political opponents, usually by mass shooting. Local residents sometimes murdered their Jewish neighbors, without any help from the invading Germans. By 1942, the Final Solution found a more efficient method: Jews and other



Overview: The Holocaust

“undesirables” were packed into trains and deported to tens of thousands of concentration camps, as well as several killing centers, whose sole purpose was murder via various means, including gas chambers. (It bears noting that almost half of all Jews killed in the Holocaust never set foot in a camp.) The elderly, the young, and the infirm were almost always the first to be sent to the gas, but there were also instances of entire boxcars full of people, even the comparatively healthy, being immediately murdered. Auschwitz-Birkenau, the largest killing center, was capable of gassing thousands per day, though some killing centers used other methods.

On arrival at camps after forced deportations, the minority of Jews who were not immediately murdered were dehumanized. They were separated by gender, stripped, shaved, assigned numbers that would replace their previous identities, and worked to death as slaves. Those deemed incapable of work were often herded into gas chambers, dying in minutes. Taunted, overworked, and underfed, inmates became emaciated and ill from disease; very few survived past the first weeks. Some prisoners, often Jewish or Roma children, suffered medical experimentation, even while laws in the Reich permitted no medical experimentation on dogs. Whatever the methods of killing, human bodies were typically stripped of gold fillings and cremated by fellow inmates who were forced to perform these tasks, filling the air with greasy ash and a foul stench.

As the Allies advanced by late 1944, the Reich desperately diverted resources away from its own defenses and towards hurried killings of Jews. This was the biggest (if not the only) priority of the Nazi leadership. Seeking to destroy evidence of their crimes, the SS destroyed documents, attempted to burn down crematories, retreated from camps, and marched starving prisoners across long distances in freezing weather towards the German interior. Prisoners who lagged on these death marches were beaten or shot beside the roads, where at least tens of thousands had already collapsed and died. Upon arriving at camps, Allied troops were horrified to discover evidence of the Holocaust, including mounds of corpses that had been left to rot in stacks. The centuries-old Jewish presence in Eastern Europe, which had served as the cultural heart of the Jewish world, had been annihilated. Two-thirds of the continent’s Jews had been murdered, totaling at least 6 million, including one-and-a-half million children. Very few of their countrymen had even attempted to come to their rescue.

Of course, Jews were not the only people to look around in horror by war’s end. The Roma, too, had been labeled “vermin” by the Nazis, who imprisoned and gassed them in large numbers in Auschwitz. Other victims of discrimination, mass murder, or genocide by the Nazis included Poles, the handicapped, communists, political dissidents, homosexuals, and Jehovah’s Witnesses.

Following Germany’s 1945 surrender, temporary displacement camps were established. Jewish survivors were frequently attacked and sometimes murdered for trying to go home. Pogroms against survivors took place in Poland’s Kielce and elsewhere, leaving several dozen



Overview: The Holocaust

dead. Many survivors saw no option except finally to emigrate from Europe. A few Nazis and their accomplices were charged at Nuremberg for crimes against peace, crimes against humanity, and war crimes, but the vast majority of perpetrators never faced any form of justice. Also troubling were the notions that so many educated, cultured people had instigated and carried out the worst of the crimes, and that most of the world had stood by. In this context, Holocaust refugee Raphael Lemkin invented a new word to name the crime and hopefully to shake the world from its reluctance to act: *genocide*.

Other impacts of the Holocaust are found in many areas, including increased attention to medical ethics, the UN's 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) of 1948, the center of Jewish culture's shift from Eastern Europe to Israel and the United States, the emergence of new and sometimes revolutionary movements in philosophy and the arts, a grappling over the true nature of God in contemporary religion, and a conspicuous movement towards tolerance between religions and ethnicities. Finally, for many people around the world, the Holocaust has redefined what it means to be a survivor—indeed, what it means to be human—and continues to serve as a template for measuring the parameters of evil.