

The Holocaust

MAIN IDEA

During the Holocaust, the Nazis systematically executed 6 million Jews and 5 million other “non-Aryans.”

WHY IT MATTERS NOW

After the atrocities of the Holocaust, agencies formed to publicize human rights. These agencies have remained a force in today’s world.

Terms & Names

- Holocaust
- *Kristallnacht*
- genocide
- ghetto
- concentration camp

One American's Story

Gerda Weissmann was a carefree girl of 15 when, in September 1939, invading German troops shattered her world. Because the Weissmanns were Jews, they were forced to give up their home to a German family. In 1942, Gerda, her parents, and most of Poland’s 3,000,000 Jews were sent to labor camps. Gerda recalls when members of Hitler’s elite *Schutzstaffel*, or “security squadron” (SS), came to round up the Jews.

A PERSONAL VOICE GERDA WEISSMANN KLEIN

“We had to form a line and an SS man stood there with a little stick. I was holding hands with my mother and . . . he looked at me and said, ‘How old?’ And I said, ‘eighteen,’ and he sort of pushed me to one side and my mother to the other side. . . . And shortly thereafter, some trucks arrived . . . and we were loaded onto the trucks. I heard my mother’s voice from very far off ask, ‘Where to?’ and I shouted back, ‘I don’t know.’”

—quoted in the film *One Survivor Remembers*

When the American lieutenant Kurt Klein, who would later become Gerda’s husband, liberated her from the Nazis in 1945—just one day before her 21st birthday—she weighed 68 pounds and her hair had turned white. Even so, of all her family and friends, she alone had survived the Nazis’ campaign to exterminate Europe’s Jews.

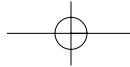


VIDEO

ESCAPING THE FINAL SOLUTION
Kurt Klein
and Gerda
Weissmann Klein
Remember the
Holocaust

The Persecution Begins

On April 7, 1933, shortly after Hitler took power in Germany, he ordered all “non-Aryans” to be removed from government jobs. This order was one of the first moves in a campaign for racial purity that eventually led to the **Holocaust**—the systematic murder of 11 million people across Europe, more than half of whom were Jews.



◀ On November 17, 1938, two passersby examine the shattered window of a Jewish-owned store in the aftermath of *Kristallnacht*.

Jewish men holding a “star of David” ▶ are rounded up and marched through the streets on their way to a concentration camp.

Vocabulary scapegoat:

someone who is made to bear the blame of others

JEWS TARGETED Although Jews were not the only victims of the Holocaust, they were the center of the Nazis’ targets. Anti-Semitism, or hatred of the Jews, had a long history in many European countries. For decades many Germans looking for a scapegoat had blamed the Jews as the cause of their failures. Hitler found that a majority of Germans were willing to support his belief that Jews were responsible for Germany’s economic problems and defeat in World War I.

As the Nazis tightened their hold on Germany, their persecution of the Jews increased. In 1935, the Nuremberg Laws stripped Jews of their German citizenship, jobs, and property. To make it easier for the Nazis to identify them, Jews had to wear a bright yellow Star of David attached to their clothing. Worse was yet to come.

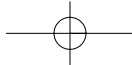
KRISTALLNACHT November 9–10, 1938, became known as *Kristallnacht* (krī’s’täl’nächt’), or “Night of Broken Glass.” Nazi storm troopers attacked Jewish homes, businesses, and synagogues across Germany. An American who witnessed the violence wrote, “Jewish shop windows by the hundreds were systematically and wantonly smashed. . . . The main streets of the city were a positive litter of shattered plate glass.” Around 100 Jews were killed, and hundreds more were injured. Some 30,000 Jews were arrested and hundreds of synagogues were burned. Afterward, the Nazis blamed the Jews for the destruction. **A**

MAIN IDEA

Analyzing Issues

A What problems did German Jews face in Nazi Germany from 1935 to 1938?

A FLOOD OF JEWISH REFUGEES Kristallnacht marked a step-up in the Nazi policy of Jewish persecution. Nazis tried to speed Jewish emigration but encountered difficulty. Jews fleeing Germany had trouble finding nations that would accept them. France already had 40,000 Jewish refugees and did not want more. The British worried about fueling anti-Semitism and refused to admit more than 80,000 Jewish refugees. They also controlled Palestine (later Israel) and allowed 30,000 refugees to settle there. Late in 1938, Germany’s foreign minister, Joachim von Ribbentrop, observed, “We all want to get rid of our Jews. The difficulty is that no country wishes to receive them.”



Although the average Jew had little chance of reaching the United States, “persons of exceptional merit,” including physicist Albert Einstein, author Thomas Mann, architect Walter Gropius, and theologian Paul Tillich were among 100,000 refugees the United States accepted. Many Americans wanted the door closed. Americans were concerned that letting in more refugees during the Great Depression would deny U.S. citizens jobs and threaten economic recovery. Among Americans, there was widespread anti-Semitism and fear that “enemy agents” would be allowed to enter the country. President Roosevelt said that while he sympathized with the Jews, he would not “do anything which would conceivably hurt the future of present American citizens.”

B

THE PLIGHT OF THE *ST. LOUIS* Official indifference to the plight of Germany’s Jews was in evidence in the case of the ship *St. Louis*. This German ocean liner passed Miami in 1939. Although 740 of the liner’s 943 passengers had U.S. immigration papers, the Coast Guard followed the ship to prevent anyone from disembarking in America. The ship was forced to return to Europe. “The cruise of the *St. Louis*,” wrote the *New York Times*, “cries to high heaven of man’s inhumanity to man.” Passenger Liane Reif-Lehrer recalls her childhood experiences.

A PERSONAL VOICE LIANE REIF-LEHRER

“My mother and brother and I were among the passengers who survived. . . . We were sent back to Europe and given haven in France, only to find the Nazis on our doorstep again a few months later.”

—Liane Reif-Lehrer

More than half of the passengers were later killed in the Holocaust.

Hitler’s “Final Solution”

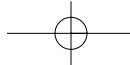
By 1939 only about a quarter million Jews remained in Germany. But other nations that Hitler occupied had millions more. Obsessed with a desire to rid Europe of its Jews, Hitler imposed what he called the “Final Solution”—a policy of **genocide**, the deliberate and systematic killing of an entire population.

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MAIN IDEA

Analyzing Effects

B How did the United States respond to Jewish refugees?



Background

The first person to use the term Final Solution was General George Custer. He was referring to the execution of Native Americans.

THE CONDEMNED Hitler’s Final Solution rested on the belief that Aryans were a superior people and that the strength and purity of this “master race” must be preserved. To accomplish this, the Nazis condemned to slavery and death not only the Jews but other groups that they viewed as inferior or unworthy or as “enemies of the state.”

After taking power in 1933, the Nazis had concentrated on silencing their political opponents—communists, socialists, liberals, and anyone else who spoke out against the government. Once the Nazis had eliminated these enemies, they turned against other groups in Germany. In addition to Jews, these groups included the following:

- *Gypsies*—whom the Nazis believed to be an “inferior race”
- *Freemasons*—whom the Nazis charged as supporters of the “Jewish conspiracy” to rule the world
- *Jehovah’s Witnesses*—who refused to join the army or salute Hitler

The Nazis also targeted other Germans whom they found unfit to be part of the “master race.” Such victims included homosexuals, the mentally deficient, the mentally ill, the physically disabled, and the incurably ill.

Hitler began implementing his Final Solution in Poland with special Nazi death squads. Hitler’s elite Nazi “security squadrons” (or SS), rounded up Jews—men, women, children, and babies—and shot them on the spot.

FORCED RELOCATION Jews also were ordered into dismal, overcrowded **ghettos**, segregated Jewish areas in certain Polish cities. The Nazis sealed off the ghettos with barbed wire and stone walls.

Life inside the ghetto was miserable. The bodies of victims piled up in the streets faster than they could be removed. Factories were built alongside ghettos where people were forced to work for German industry. In spite of the impossible living conditions, the Jews hung on. While some formed resistance movements inside the ghettos, others resisted by other means. They published and distributed underground newspapers. Secret schools were set up to educate Jewish children. Even theater and music groups continued to operate.

ANOTHER

PERSPECTIVE

DENMARK’S RESISTANCE

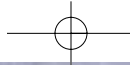
King Christian X became an important symbol of Danish resistance in World War II. In 1942, he rejected the Nazis’ demand to enforce the Nuremberg Laws against the Jews in occupied Denmark. In August 1943, the king spoke out against the German occupying forces, an act that led to his imprisonment for the remainder of the war.

Estimated Jewish Losses			
	Pre-Holocaust Population	Number Killed	
		Low Estimate	High Estimate
Austria	191,000	50,000	65,500
Belgium	60,000	25,000	29,000
Bohemia/Moravia	92,000	77,000	78,300
Denmark	8,000	60	116
Estonia	4,600	1,500	2,000
France	260,000	75,000	77,000
Germany	566,000	135,000	142,000
Greece	73,000	59,000	67,000
Hungary	725,000	502,000	569,000
Italy	48,000	6,500	9,000
Latvia	95,000	70,000	72,000
Lithuania	155,000	130,000	143,000
Luxembourg	3,500	1,000	2,000
Netherlands	112,000	100,000	105,000
Norway	1,700	800	800
Poland	3,250,000	2,700,000	3,000,000
Romania	441,000	121,000	287,000
Slovakia	89,000	60,000	71,000
USSR	2,825,000	700,000	1,100,000
Yugoslavia	68,000	56,000	65,000
TOTALS	9,067,800	4,869,860	5,894,716

Source: Columbia Guide to the Holocaust

SKILLBUILDER Interpreting Charts

Approximately what percentage of the total Jewish population in Europe was killed during the Holocaust?



▲ On May 9, 1945, inmates at the Ebensee concentration camp in Austria were liberated by U.S. soldiers.

CONCENTRATION CAMPS Finally, Jews in communities not reached by the killing squads were dragged from their homes and herded onto trains or trucks for shipment to **concentration camps**, or labor camps. Families were often separated, sometimes—like the Weissmanns—forever.

Nazi concentration camps were originally set up to imprison political opponents and protesters. The camps were later turned over to the SS, who expanded the concentration camp and used it to warehouse other “undesirables.” Life in the camps was a cycle of hunger, humiliation, and work that almost always ended in death.

The prisoners were crammed into crude wooden barracks that held up to a thousand people each. They shared their crowded quarters, as well as their meager meals, with hordes of rats and fleas. Hunger was so intense, recalled one survivor, “that if a bit of soup spilled over, prisoners would converge on the spot, dig their spoons into the mud and stuff the mess into their mouths.”

Inmates in the camps worked from dawn to dusk, seven days a week, until they collapsed. Those too weak to work were killed. Some, like Rudolf Reder, endured. He was one of only two Jews to survive the camp at Belzec, Poland.



▲ After stripping their victims of life and dignity, the Nazis hoarded whatever articles of value the victims had possessed, such as wedding rings and gold fillings from teeth.

▲ A PERSONAL VOICE RUDOLF REDER

“The brute Schmidt was our guard; he beat and kicked us if he thought we were not working fast enough. He ordered his victims to lie down and gave them 25 lashes with a whip, ordering them to count out loud. If the victim made a mistake, he was given 50 lashes. . . . Thirty or 40 of us were shot every day. A doctor usually prepared a daily list of the weakest men. During the lunch break they were taken to a nearby grave and shot. They were replaced the following morning by new arrivals from the transport of the day. . . . It was a miracle if anyone survived for five or six months in Belzec.”

—quoted in *The Holocaust*



The Final Stage

The Final Solution reached its final stage in early 1942. At a meeting held in Wannsee, a lakeside suburb near Berlin, Hitler's top officials agreed to begin a new phase of the mass murder of Jews. To mass slaughter and starvation they would add a third method of killing—murder by poison gas. 🕒

MASS EXTERMINATIONS As deadly as overwork, starvation, beatings, and bullets were, they did not kill fast enough to satisfy the Nazis. The Germans built six death camps in Poland. The first, Chelmno, began operating in 1941—before the meeting at Wannsee. Each camp had several huge gas chambers in which as many as 12,000 people could be killed a day.

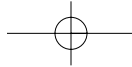
When prisoners arrived at Auschwitz, the largest of the death camps, they had to parade by several SS doctors. With a wave of the hand, the doctors separated those strong enough to work from those who would die that day. Both groups were told to leave all their belongings behind, with a promise that they would be returned later. Those destined to die were then led into a room outside the gas chamber and were told to undress for a shower. To complete the deception, the prisoners were even

MAIN IDEA

Summarizing

🕒 What was the goal of the Nazis' Final Solution, and how was that goal nearly achieved?

▲ Prisoners were required to wear color-coded triangles on their uniforms. The categories of prisoners include communists, socialists, criminals, emigrants, Jehovah's Witnesses, homosexuals, Germans "shy of work," and other nationalities "shy of work." The vertical categories show a variation. One for repeat offenders, one for prisoners assigned to punish other prisoners, and double triangles for Jews. Letters on top of a patch indicate nationality.



Children taken from Eastern Europe and imprisoned in Auschwitz look out from behind the barbed-wire fence in July 1944.



WORLD STAGE

RIGHTEOUS PERSONS OF WORLD WAR II

In the midst of the world's overall indifference to the plight of Jewish refugees, thousands of non-Jews risked—and in many cases lost—their own lives to save Jews from the Nazis. In recognition of such heroic efforts, the Israeli Parliament, the Knesset, bestowed on these individuals the title of Righteous Gentiles (or Righteous Persons). As of the year 2001 more than 18,269 individuals were recognized for their courage and morality.

Aristides de Sousa Mendes, a Portuguese diplomat stationed in France, defied his government's orders and issued some 10,000 visas to Jews seeking entry to his country. The Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg issued "protective passports" that allowed thousands of Hungarian Jews to escape the Nazi death camps. Even citizens of Germany lent a hand. And Sempo Sugihara, Japanese consul in Lithuania, helped over 6,000 Jews to escape the Nazis' clutches, an act that cost him his career.

given pieces of soap. Finally, they were led into the chamber and poisoned with cyanide gas that spewed from vents in the walls. This orderly mass extermination was sometimes carried out to the accompaniment of cheerful music played by an orchestra of camp inmates who had temporarily been spared execution.

At first the bodies were buried in huge pits. At Belzec, Rudolf Reder was part of a 500-man death brigade that labored all day, he said, "either at grave digging or emptying the gas chambers." But the decaying corpses gave off a stench that could be smelled for miles around. Worse yet, mass graves left evidence of the mass murder. Lilli Kopecky recalls her arrival at Auschwitz.

A PERSONAL VOICE LILLI KOPECKY

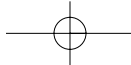
"When we came to Auschwitz, we smelt the sweet smell. They said to us: 'There the people are gassed, three kilometers over there.' We didn't believe it."

—quoted in *Never Again*

At some camps, to try to cover up the evidence of their slaughter, the Nazis installed huge crematoriums, or ovens, in which to burn the dead. At other camps, the bodies were simply thrown into a pit and set on fire.

Gassing was not the only method of extermination used in the camps. Prisoners were also shot, hanged, or injected with poison.

Still others died as a result of horrible medical experiments carried out by camp doctors. Some of these victims were injected with deadly germs in order to study the effect of disease on different groups of people. Many more were used to test methods of sterilization, a subject of great interest to some Nazi doctors in their search for ways to improve the "master race."



THE SURVIVORS An estimated six million Jews died in the death camps and in the Nazi massacres. But some miraculously escaped the worst of the Holocaust. Many had help from ordinary people who were appalled by the Nazis' treatment of Jews. Some Jews even survived the horrors of the concentration camps.

In Gerda Weissmann Klein's view, survival depended as much on one's spirit as on getting enough to eat. "I do believe that if you were blessed with imagination, you could work through it," she wrote. "If, unfortunately, you were a person that faced reality, I think you didn't have much of a chance." Those who did come out of the camps alive were forever changed by what they had witnessed. For survivor Elie Wiesel, who entered Auschwitz in 1944 at the age of 14, the sun had set forever.

"Survival is both an exalted privilege and a painful burden."

GERDA WEISSMANN KLEIN

A PERSONAL VOICE ELIE WIESEL

"Never shall I forget that night, the first night in the camp, which has turned my life into one long night. . . . Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky. Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever. Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never."

—Night

▲ Elie Wiesel, 1986



ASSESSMENT

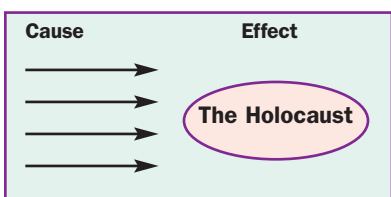
1. TERMS & NAMES For each term or name, write a sentence explaining its significance.

- Holocaust
- genocide
- concentration camp
- Kristallnacht
- ghetto

MAIN IDEA

2. TAKING NOTES

List at least four events that led to the Holocaust.



Write a paragraph summarizing one of the events that you listed.

CRITICAL THINKING

3. EVALUATING DECISIONS

Do you think that the United States was justified in not allowing more Jewish refugees to emigrate? Why or why not? **Think About:**

- the views of isolationists in the United States
- some Americans' prejudices and fears
- the incident on the German luxury liner *St. Louis*

4. DEVELOPING HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Why do you think the Nazi system of systematic genocide was so brutally effective? Support your answer with details from the text.

5. ANALYZING MOTIVES

How might concentration camp doctors and guards have justified to themselves the death and suffering they caused other human beings?