

History of the Holocaust — An Introduction

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

Liberation and the End of War 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

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	Estonia	4,000	Latvia	85,000	Romania	364,632
Albania	200	France	83,000	Lithuania	135,000	Soviet Union	1,500,000
Austria	65,000	Germany	160,000	Luxembourg	700	Yugoslavia	67,122
Belgium	24,387	Greece	71,301	Netherlands	106,000		
Czechoslovakia	277,000	Hungary	305,000	Norway	728		
Denmark	77	Italy	8,000	Poland	3,001,000		