

INTRODUCTION TO THE HOLOCAUST



Two German Jewish families at a gathering before the war. Only two people in this group survived the Holocaust. Germany, 1928.
— *US Holocaust Memorial Museum*

The Holocaust was the systematic, bureaucratic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of approximately six million Jews by the Nazi regime and its collaborators. "Holocaust" is a word of Greek origin meaning "sacrifice by fire." The Nazis, who came to power in Germany in January 1933, believed that Germans were "racially superior" and that the Jews, deemed "inferior," were an alien threat to the so-called German racial community.

During the era of the Holocaust, German authorities also targeted other groups because of their perceived "racial inferiority": Roma (Gypsies), the disabled, and some of the Slavic peoples (Poles, Russians, and others). Other groups were persecuted on political, ideological, and behavioral grounds, among them Communists, Socialists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and homosexuals.

WHAT WAS THE HOLOCAUST?

In 1933, the Jewish population of Europe stood at over nine million. Most European Jews lived in countries that Nazi Germany would occupy or influence during World War II. By 1945, the Germans and their collaborators killed nearly two out of every three European Jews as part of the "Final Solution," the Nazi policy to murder the Jews of Europe. Although Jews, whom the Nazis deemed a priority danger to Germany, were the primary victims of Nazi racism, other victims included some 200,000 Roma (Gypsies). At least 200,000 mentally or physically disabled patients, mainly Germans, living in institutional settings, were murdered in the so-called Euthanasia Program.

As Nazi tyranny spread across Europe, the Germans and their collaborators persecuted and murdered millions of other people. Between two and three million Soviet prisoners of war were murdered or died of starvation, disease, neglect, or maltreatment. The Germans targeted the non-Jewish Polish intelligentsia for killing, and deported millions of Polish and Soviet civilians forced labor in Germany or in occupied Poland, where these individuals worked and often died under deplorable conditions. From the earliest years of the Nazi regime, German authorities persecuted homosexuals and others whose behavior did not match prescribed social norms. German police officials targeted thousands of political opponents (including Communists,

Socialists, and trade unionists) and religious dissidents (such as Jehovah's Witnesses). Many of these individuals died as a result of incarceration and maltreatment.

ADMINISTRATION OF THE "FINAL SOLUTION"

In the early years of the Nazi regime, the National Socialist government established concentration camps to detain real and imagined political and ideological opponents. Increasingly in the years before the outbreak of war, SS and police officials incarcerated Jews, Roma, and other victims of ethnic and racial hatred in these camps. To concentrate and monitor the Jewish population as well as to facilitate later deportation of the Jews, the Germans and their collaborators created ghettos, transit camps, and forced-labor camps for Jews during the war years. The German authorities also established numerous forced-labor camps, both in the so-called Greater German Reich and in German-occupied territory, for non-Jews whose labor the Germans sought to exploit.

Following the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, Einsatzgruppen (mobile killing units) and, later, militarized battalions of Order Police officials, moved behind German lines to carry out mass-murder operations against Jews, Roma, and Soviet state and Communist Party officials. German SS and police units, supported by units of the Wehrmacht and the Waffen SS, murdered more than a million Jewish men, women, and children, and hundreds of thousands of others. Between 1941 and 1944, Nazi German authorities deported millions of Jews from Germany, from occupied territories, and from the countries of many of its Axis allies to ghettos and to killing centers, often called extermination camps, where they were murdered in specially developed gassing facilities.

THE END OF THE HOLOCAUST

In the final months of the war, SS guards moved camp inmates by train or on forced marches, often called "death marches," in an attempt to prevent the Allied liberation of large numbers of prisoners. As Allied forces moved across Europe in a series of offensives against Germany, they began to encounter and liberate concentration camp prisoners, as well as prisoners en route by forced march from one camp to another. The marches continued until May 7, 1945, the day the German armed forces surrendered unconditionally to the Allies. For the western Allies, World War II officially ended in Europe on the next day, May 8 (V-E Day), while Soviet forces announced their "Victory Day" on May 9, 1945.

In the aftermath of the Holocaust, many of the survivors found shelter in displaced persons (DP) camps administered by the Allied powers. Between 1948 and 1951, almost 700,000 Jews emigrated to Israel, including 136,000 Jewish displaced persons from Europe. Other Jewish DPs emigrated to the United States and other nations. The last DP camp closed in 1957. The crimes committed during the Holocaust devastated most European Jewish communities and eliminated hundreds of Jewish communities in occupied eastern Europe entirely.

CHILDREN DURING THE HOLOCAUST



Two young brothers, seated for a family photograph in the Kovno ghetto. One month later, they were deported to the Majdanek camp. Kovno, Lithuania, February 1944.

— *US Holocaust Memorial Museum*



Children were especially vulnerable in the era of the Holocaust. The Nazis advocated killing children of “unwanted” or “dangerous” groups in accordance with their ideological views, either as part of the “racial struggle” or as a measure of preventative security. The Germans and their collaborators killed children both for these ideological reasons and in retaliation for real or alleged partisan attacks.

The Germans and their collaborators killed as many as 1.5 million children, including over a million Jewish children and tens of thousands of Romani (Gypsy) children, German children with physical and mental disabilities living in institutions, Polish children, and children residing in the occupied Soviet Union. The chances for survival for Jewish and some non-Jewish adolescents (13-18 years old) were greater, as they could be deployed at forced labor.

The fate of Jewish and non-Jewish children can be categorized in the following way: 1) children killed when they arrived in killing centers; 2) children killed immediately after birth or in institutions; 3) children born in ghettos and camps who survived because prisoners hid them; 4) children, usually over age 12, who were used as laborers and as subjects of medical experiments; and 5) those children killed during reprisal operations or so-called anti-partisan operations.

In the ghettos, Jewish children died from starvation and exposure as well as lack of adequate clothing and shelter. The German authorities were indifferent to this mass death because they considered most of the younger ghetto children to be unproductive and hence “useless eaters.” Because children were generally too young to be deployed at forced labor, German authorities generally selected them, along with the elderly, ill, and disabled, for the first deportations to killing centers, or as the first victims led to mass graves to be shot.

Upon arrival at Auschwitz-Birkenau and other killing centers, the camp authorities sent the majority of children directly to the gas chambers. SS and police forces in German-occupied Poland and the occupied Soviet Union shot thousands of children at the edge of mass graves. Sometimes the selection of children to fill the first transports to the killing centers or to provide the first victims of shooting operations resulted from the agonizing and controversial decisions of Jewish council (Judenrat) chairmen. The decision by the Judenrat in Lodz in September 1942 to deport children to the Chelmno killing center was an example of the tragic choices made by adults when faced with German demands. Janusz Korczak, director of an orphanage in the Warsaw ghetto, however, refused to abandon the children under his care when they were selected for deportation. He accompanied them on the transport to the Treblinka killing center and into the gas chambers, sharing their fate.

Non-Jewish children from certain targeted groups were not spared. Examples include Romani (Gypsy) children killed in Auschwitz concentration camp; 5,000 to 7,000 children killed as victims of the “euthanasia” program; children murdered in reprisals, including most of the children of Lidice; and children in villages in the occupied Soviet Union who were killed with their parents.

The German authorities also incarcerated a number of children in concentration camps and transit camps. SS physicians and medical researchers used a number of children, including twins, in concentration

camps for medical experiments that often resulted in the deaths of the children. Concentration camp authorities deployed adolescents, particularly Jewish adolescents, at forced labor in the concentration camps, where many died because of conditions. The German authorities held other children under appalling conditions in transit camps, such as the case of Anne Frank and her sister in Bergen-Belsen, and non-Jewish orphaned children whose parents the German military and police units had killed in so-called anti-partisan operations. Some of these orphans were held temporarily in the Lublin/Majdanek concentration camp and other detention camps.

In their "search to retrieve 'Aryan blood,'" SS race experts ordered hundreds of children in occupied Poland and the occupied Soviet Union to be kidnapped and transferred to the Reich to be adopted by racially suitable German families. Although the basis for these decisions was "race-scientific," often blond hair, blue eyes, or fair skin was sufficient to merit the "opportunity" to be "Germanized." On the other hand, female Poles and Soviet civilians who had been deported to Germany for forced labor and who had had sexual relations with a German man -- often under duress -- resulting in pregnancy were forced to have abortions or to bear their children under conditions that would ensure the infant's death, if the "race experts" determined that the child would have insufficient German blood.

In spite of their acute vulnerability, many children discovered ways to survive. Children smuggled food and medicines into the ghettos, after smuggling personal possessions to trade for them out of the ghettos. Children in youth movements later participated in underground resistance activities. Many children escaped with parents or other relatives -- and sometimes on their own -- to family camps run by Jewish partisans. Between 1938 and 1940, the Kindertransport (Children's Transport) was the informal name of a rescue effort which brought thousands of refugee Jewish children (without their parents) to safety in Great Britain from Nazi Germany and German-occupied territories. Some non-Jews hid Jewish children and sometimes, as in the case of Anne Frank, hid other family members as well. In France, almost the entire Protestant population of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, as well as many Catholic priests, nuns, and lay Catholics, hid Jewish children in the town from 1942 to 1944. In Italy and Belgium, many children survived in hiding.

After the surrender of Nazi Germany, ending World War II, refugees and displaced persons searched throughout Europe for missing children. Thousands of orphaned children were in displaced persons camps. Many surviving Jewish children fled eastern Europe as part of the mass exodus (Brihah) to the western zones of occupied Germany, en route to the Yishuv (the Jewish settlement in Palestine). Through Youth Aliyah (Youth Immigration), thousands migrated to the Yishuv, and then to the state of Israel after its establishment in 1948.

"Children during the Holocaust." United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. United States Holocaust Memorial Council,

10 June 2013. Web. 10 Feb. 2014.