**INTRODUCTION TO THE HOLOCAUST**

The Holocaust was the systematic, bureaucratic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of 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 for 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.

**"FINAL SOLUTION": OVERVIEW**

The Nazis frequently used euphemistic language to disguise the true nature of their crimes. They used the term “Final Solution” to refer to their plan to annihilate the Jewish people. It is not known when the leaders of Nazi Germany definitively decided to implement the "Final Solution." The genocide, or mass destruction, of the Jews was the culmination of a decade of increasingly severe discriminatory measures.

Under the rule of Adolf Hitler, the persecution and segregation of Jews was implemented in stages. After the Nazi party achieved power in Germany in 1933, its state-sponsored racism led to anti-Jewish legislation, economic boycotts, and the violence of the Kristallnacht ("Night of Broken Glass") pogroms, all of which aimed to systematically isolate Jews from society and drive them out of the country.

**ANTI-JEWISH POLICY ESCALATES**

After the September 1939 German invasion of Poland (the beginning of World War II), anti-Jewish policy escalated to the imprisonment and eventual murder of European Jewry. The Nazis first established ghettos (enclosed areas designed to isolate and control the Jews) in the Generalgouvernement (a territory in central and eastern Poland overseen by a German civilian government) and the Warthegau (an area of western Poland annexed to Germany). Polish and western European Jews were deported to these ghettos where they lived in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions with inadequate food.

**MASSIVE KILLING OPERATIONS BEGIN**

After the June 1941 German invasion of the Soviet Union, SS and police units (acting as mobile killing units) began massive killing operations aimed at entire Jewish communities. By autumn 1941, the SS and police introduced mobile gas vans. These paneled trucks had exhaust pipes reconfigured to pump poisonous carbon monoxide gas into sealed spaces, killing those locked within. They were designed to complement ongoing shooting operations.

On July 17, 1941, four weeks after the invasion of the Soviet Union, Hitler tasked SS chief Heinrich Himmler with responsibility for all security matters in the occupied Soviet Union. Hitler gave Himmler broad authority to physically eliminate any perceived threats to permanent German rule. Two weeks later, on July 31, 1941, Nazi leader Hermann Goering authorized SS General Reinhard Heydrich to make preparations for the implementation of a "complete solution of the Jewish question."

**KILLING CENTERS**

In the autumn of 1941, SS chief Heinrich Himmler assigned German General Odilo Globocnik (SS and police leader for the Lublin District) with the implementation of a plan to systematically murder the Jews of the Generalgouvernement. The code name Operation Reinhard was eventually given to this plan, named after Heydrich (who was assassinated by Czech partisans in May 1942). As part of Operation Reinhard, Nazi leaders established three killing centers in Poland—Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka—with the sole purpose of the mass murder of Jews.

The Majdanek camp served from time to time as a killing site for Jews residing in the Generalgouvernement. In its gas chambers, the SS killed tens of thousands of Jews, primarily forced laborers too weak to work. The SS and police killed at least 152,000 people, mostly Jews, but also a few thousand Roma (Gypsies), in gas vans at the Chelmno killing center about thirty miles northwest of Lodz. In the spring of 1942, Himmler designated Auschwitz II (Auschwitz-Birkenau) as a killing facility. SS authorities murdered approximately one million Jews from various European countries at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

German SS and police murdered nearly 2,700,000 Jews in the killing centers either by asphyxiation with poison gas or by shooting. In its entirety, the "Final Solution" called for the murder of all European Jews by gassing, shooting, and other means. Six million Jewish men, women, and children were killed during the Holocaust—two-thirds of the Jews living in Europe before World War II.

**CONCENTRATION CAMP SYSTEM: IN DEPTH**

German authorities under National Socialism established a variety of detention facilities to confine those whom they defined as political, ideological, or racial opponents of the regime. In time their extensive camp system came to include concentration camps, where persons were incarcerated without observation of the standard norms applying to arrest and custody; labor camps; prisoner of war camps; transit camps; and camps which served as killing centers, often called extermination camps or death camps.

In the earliest years of the Third Reich, various central, regional, and local authorities in Germany established concentration camps to detain political opponents of the regime, including German Communists, Socialists, trade unionists, and others from left and liberal political circles. In the spring of 1933, the SS established Dachau concentration camp, which came to serve as a model for an expanding and centralized concentration camp system under SS management.

**WHO WAS INCARCERATED?**

Hence, individuals could be incarcerated in concentration camps indefinitely 1) without ever being charged for a specific act; 2) after having been acquitted on charges relating to a specific crime; 3) upon release from prison after serving a sentence handed down by a German court for a specific act; 4) or because the SS and police authorities deemed that individual—often on the basis of alleged racial inferiority or alleged racially driven “hostility to Germany”—was a danger to German society.

After the SS leadership, with Hitler's blessing, detached the pre-Nazi police detective forces from state administrative and judicial oversight in the years 1933-1936, only the centralized SS and police authorities could determine who was a danger to the German “race” and order the incarceration of such persons in a concentration camp. For persons perceived to be political and racial opponents of the Reich, the Gestapo issued “protective custody” (Schutzhaft) orders, which authorized the incarceration in the camps of Jews, Social Democrats, Communists, liberals, Freemasons, Jehovah's Witnesses, clergy who opposed the Nazis, members of national opposition movements, non-Germans in general after Germany began to occupy Europe, and any others whose behavior—real or perceived—could be interpreted as politically motivated opposition.

For persons whose real or perceived behavior or actions were considered criminal but non-political in nature, or socially deviant so as to create a so-called danger to German society, the Criminal Police office issued “preventative arrest” (Vorbeugungshaft) orders. Under these orders, which were often motivated more by racial and social prejudice than by actual criminal violations, Roma and Sinti (Gypsies), so-called asocials, repeat criminal offenders, homosexuals, and so-called security suspects were incarcerated in the concentration camps. Although the language of these arrest orders contained limits on the time during which a prisoner could be incarcerated, in practice incarcerations were routinely extended indefinitely. After World War II began, Himmler forbade in general the release of concentration camp prisoners for the duration of the war.

**EVACUATIONS AND LIBERATION**

As the Third Reich began to collapse, thousands of prisoners in German-occupied territories were sent on forced marches to the German interior in order to prevent the mass capture of prisoners by Allied forces. Surviving prisoners described these brutal ordeals as “death marches,” due to the high mortality rate and the ruthlessness with which the SS guards shot those unable to keep up. Due to both the forced marches and the collapse of supply shipments to the camps during the last winter of the war, the death count among prisoners from starvation, disease, and exposure increased dramatically. Historians estimate that nearly half of the more than 700,000 prisoners left in the concentration camp system in January 1945 had died by the end of May. Hundreds more died even after liberation because their bodies had sustained too much abuse to permit survival. In the last months of war, the discovery of the horrors of the German camp system by Allied units brought the staggering scope of Nazi atrocities to the attention of the world.

Scholars have estimated that the Nazi regime incarcerated hundreds of thousands, even millions of people in the concentration camp system between 1933 and 1945. It is difficult to estimate the total number of deaths. One estimate notes a range of between 795,889 and 955,215 deaths of registered prisoners, excluding the deaths of registered Jewish prisoners at Auschwitz and Lublin/Majdanek. If one counts the number of Jews (registered and unregistered) killed at Auschwitz (approximately one million) and at Lublin/Majdanek (at least 89,000), the number of deaths in the concentration camp system ranges between 1,885,889 and 2,045,215.

**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.

**SOURCE**: United States Holocaust Museum, https://www.ushmm.org/