

HOLOCAUST DEFINITIONS

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC, USA

L1

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.

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Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, Israel

The Holocaust was unprecedented genocide, total and systematic, perpetrated by Nazi Germany and its collaborators, with the aim of annihilating the Jewish people. The primary motivation was the Nazis' antisemitic racist ideology. Between 1933 and 1941, Nazi Germany pursued a policy that dispossessed the Jews of their rights and their property, followed by the branding and concentration of the Jewish population. This policy gained broad support in Germany and much of occupied Europe. In 1941, following the invasion of the Soviet Union, the Nazis and their collaborators launched the systematic mass murder of the Jews. By 1945, nearly six million Jews had been murdered.

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Imperial War Museum, London, UK*

‘The Holocaust’ is the term used to describe the systematic and wholesale slaughter of the Jews of Europe by the Nazis and their collaborators during the Second World War. Two-thirds of European Jewry perished between 1939 and 1945.

On coming to power in 1933, the Nazis began to actively persecute the Jews of Germany with the introduction of discriminatory legislation which was accompanied by vicious antisemitic propaganda. With the outbreak of the Second World War, the process escalated. Nazi conquests meant that every Jew in occupied Europe was under the threat of death.

Other groups besides the Jews fell victim to Nazi racial policies. Poles, Slavs, Soviet prisoners of war, Roma and Sinti (gypsies), were all murdered in vast numbers. And Hitler’s political opponents, communists and trade unionists, Jehovah’s Witnesses and homosexuals were also brutally done to death in Nazi concentration camps.

*This definition has been abridged, specifically the third paragraph has not been included. No other changes have been made. The complete definition is available at iwm.org.uk/history/the-holocaust#.