



Introduction

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, a policy that became known as the "Final Solution." By 1945, nearly six million Jews had been murdered.

The Nazis also persecuted many other groups in different ways, including Roma and Sinti, LGBTQ+, people with disabilities, some Slavic peoples, Black people, Communists, Socialists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and others the Nazis deemed "asocials," for racial and ideological reasons.

Historical Context

When the Nazis rose to power in Germany in 1933, their goals were to make Germany into a super power and to cleanse Germany of Jews and anything they considered to be Jewish. For the Nazis, the so-called "Jewish Question" or "Jewish Problem" had to be solved in order for Germans to assume their place as the "master race" in the world.

Hatred of the Jews had long been entrenched in Europe. The image of the Jew as the murderer of Jesus and the fact that Jews had rejected Christianity led to widespread hatred and suspicion. A combination of this antisemitism and ideas about certain races being superior to others invested traditional antisemitism with a new and dynamic image. Racial theories became prevalent in much of Europe, including Germany in the middle of the nineteenth century. With the Nazi rise to power, racial antisemitism became the official policy of Germany.

During the first years of their reign the Nazis isolated German Jews, abolished their citizenship, restricted their role in the economy and society in general, and later appropriated their property. From the beginning, there was violence against Jews, but no policy of state-organized violence. These early measures were designed to stop Jewish influence and convince Jews that they had no future in Germany, so they would leave.

Especially after Germany took over Austria in 1938, the Nazis began using more force to get Jews to leave. Early concentration camps like Dachau and Sachsenhausen that had been established to break opposition to Nazism, were now used increasingly to intimidate Jews. Jewish property was expropriated more forcefully. In November 1938 a violent riot against the Jews, known as the *Kristallnacht Pogrom*, erupted. It sent a clear message to Jews that they should leave. However, immigration restrictions and later, the outbreak of WWII, made leaving increasingly difficult.

With the outbreak of WWII in September 1939 and the conquest and division of Poland, nearly 2 million Jews came under Nazi German control. Nazi policy forcing Jews into specific territories continued along several tracks, but ultimately all of these plans were abandoned.

While these ideas were being pursued, the Nazis began to isolate Jews in Poland into ghettos in autumn 1939 and continued into 1941. The ghettos were never seen as a solution to the “Jewish Problem” but as a stop-gap measure until a more definitive solution could be found. In Poland and later in the Soviet Union, which the Germans and their allies attacked in June 1941, some 1,100 ghettos were established. Conditions in the ghettos varied, yet most could be characterized by overcrowding, insufficient food, and often, high death rates. Still as individuals, families, and communities, Jews struggled to maintain their lives in the ghettos.

Genocide

The purpose of the German attack on the Soviet Union in 1941 was to conquer more territory, eliminate the Communist threat, and establish their rule based on their racial ideology. All Jewish men, who were seen by the Nazis as Communists, as well as Communist political officers and to a lesser extent, Roma men, were the first to be targeted in mass shootings. Soon Jewish women and children were being shot as well. The shootings were carried out primarily by special SS groups known as the Einsatzgruppen and many other formations. Over 2 million Jews were shot in this way. After several months, systematic murder was adopted as the overall policy, “The Final Solution.”

By the end of 1941, the Nazis began to establish death camps, where Jews were killed primarily in gas chambers. Chelmno was the first such camp, followed by Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka. The Majdanek and Auschwitz camps were both labor and death camps. About half of the six million Jews murdered in the Holocaust were killed in such camps. The industrialized murder in the camps became symbolic of the Holocaust, with Auschwitz becoming an icon for this murder.

During the course of the war, ghettos were generally liquidated in stages and most of the population sent to death camps. However, the ghettos had also become sites of forced labor. The Nazis exploited Jewish labor in ghettos and labor camps, but never planned to keep Jewish workers alive in the long term. Nonetheless, for a small percentage of Jews, labor became a narrow bridge to survival, since some laborers remained alive long enough to see the defeat of Nazi Germany.

With the advent of the “Final Solution” many Jews tried to resist. Some formed undergrounds in ghettos, others joined partisan units, many tried to hide during round-ups of Jews or sought long-term refuge. Other means were also tried, but as a general rule, the Jews were powerless on their own to stop the murder or achieve large-scale rescue, and very frequently their neighbors were hostile toward them, or unwilling or afraid to help. Only a very small percentage of Jews managed to evade the killings with the help of outsiders.

The Allies who fought Nazi Germany and its partners aided Jews to some degree. However, owing to a number of factors, including the difficulty in fully grasping Nazi crimes, their distance from the places of murder, and their intense focus on winning the war, the Allied efforts to help never came close to the Nazi efforts to murder the Jews.

Aftermath

When the Allied troops (led by the United States, United Kingdom, and Soviet Union) defeated the Nazis, they encountered evidence of the Holocaust: documentation, witnesses, mass graves, and concentration and death camps. Europe was in disarray; millions were displaced, and entire cities were destroyed. Displaced persons camps were established to house Jewish survivors. Many Jews continued to face antisemitism and violence and most Jews decided to emigrate. There were many postwar trials, including the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg, to prosecute various Nazis for war crimes but the majority eluded justice.