

What Was 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. At least 200,000 mentally or physically disabled patients, mainly Germans, living in institutional settings, were murdered in the so-called Euthanasia Program.

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.

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.

Model Document: Kristallnacht: A Nationwide Pogrom

Germans pass by the broken shop window of a Jewish-owned business that was destroyed during Kristallnacht



Kristallnacht, literally, “Night of Crystal,” is often referred to as the “Night of Broken Glass.” The name refers to the wave of violent anti-Jewish pogroms that took place on November 9 and 10, 1938 throughout Germany, annexed Austria, and in areas of...Czechoslovakia recently occupied by German troops.

Instigated primarily by Nazi Party officials, members of the SA (*Sturmabteilungen*: literally Assault Detachments, but commonly known as Storm Troopers) and Hitler Youth, Kristallnacht owes its name to the shards of shattered glass that lined German streets in the wake of the pogrom—broken glass from the windows of synagogues, homes, and Jewish-owned businesses plundered and destroyed during the violence.

pogrom: an organized massacre of a particular ethnic group, in particular that of Jews in Russia or Eastern Europe.

Image Courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration
Text Copyright © United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC

Connecting Documents: Star of David Badge

A yellow Star of David badge bearing the German word Jude (Jew)



In September 1941, the Nazi regime, at Goebbels's urgent request, ordered Germany's Jews over the age of 6 to sew on their clothing a yellow Star of David with the word Jude (Jew) in bold, Hebrew-like letters. The following year, the measure was introduced in France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Slovakia, and other lands under German control.

Text Copyright © United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC

Connecting Documents: Deportation

Deportation



Between July 22 and September 12, 1942, the German authorities deported or murdered around 300,000 Jews in the Warsaw ghetto. SS and police units deported 265,000 Jews to the Treblinka killing center and 11,580 to forced-labor camps. The Germans and their auxiliaries murdered more than 10,000 Jews in the Warsaw ghetto during the deportation operations. The German authorities granted only 35,000 Jews permission to remain in the ghetto, while more than 20,000 Jews remained in the ghetto in hiding. For the at least 55,000–60,000 Jews remaining in the Warsaw ghetto, deportation seemed inevitable.

*Image Courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration
Text Copyright © United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC*