**The Holocaust:  
An Introductory History**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| [Print Friendly and PDF](http://www.printfriendly.com/) |  |  |  |

The [Holocaust](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/holo.html) (also called *Ha-Shoah* in Hebrew) refers to the period from January 30, 1933 - when [Adolf Hitler](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/hitlertoc.html) became chancellor of [Germany](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/vjw/germany.html) - to May 8, 1945, when the war in Europe officially ended. During this time, [Jews](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/jews.html) in Europe were subjected to progressively harsher persecution that ultimately led to the murder of 6,000,000 [Jews](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/jews.html) (1.5 million of these being children) and the destruction of 5,000 Jewish communities. These deaths represented two-thirds of European Jewry and one-third of all world Jewry.

The [Jews](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/jews.html) who died were not casualties of the fighting that ravaged Europe during [World War II](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/wwtoc.html). Rather, they were the victims of Germany's deliberate and systematic attempt to annihilate the entire Jewish population of Europe, a plan [Hitler](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/hitlertoc.html) called the [“Final Solution”](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/final.html) (*Endlosung*).

**Background**

After its defeat in World War I, [Germany](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/vjw/germany.html) was humiliated by the Versailles Treaty, which reduced its prewar territory, drastically reduced its armed forces, demanded the recognition of its guilt for the war, and stipulated it pay reparations to the allied powers. With the German Empire destroyed, a new parliamentary government called the Weimar Republic was formed. The republic suffered from economic instability, which grew worse during the worldwide depression after the [New York](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/states/NY.html) stock market crash in 1929. Massive inflation followed by very high unemployment heightened existing class and political differences and began to undermine the government.

On January 30, 1933, [Adolf Hitler](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/hitlertoc.html), leader of the [National Socialist German Workers (Nazi) Party](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/nazipartytoc.html), was named chancellor of [Germany](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/vjw/germany.html) by President [Paul von Hindenburg](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/hindenburg.html) after the [Nazi party](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/nazipartytoc.html) won a significant percentage of the vote in the elections of 1932. The Nazi Party had taken advantage of the political unrest in Germany to gain an electoral foothold. The Nazis incited clashes with the communists and conducted a vicious propaganda campaign against its political opponents - the weak Weimar government and the [Jews](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/jews.html) whom the Nazis blamed for Germany's ills.

**Propaganda: “The Jews Are Our Misfortune”**

A major tool of the Nazis' propaganda assault was the weekly Nazi newspaper [*Der Stürmer*](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/sturmertoc.html) (The Attacker). At the bottom of the front page of each issue, in bold letters, the paper proclaimed, "The [Jews](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/jews.html) are our misfortune!" *Der Stürmer* also regularly featured cartoons of [Jews](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/jews.html) in which they were caricatured as hooked-nosed and ape­like. The influence of the newspaper was far-reaching: by 1938 about a half million copies were distributed weekly.

Soon after he became chancellor, [Hitler](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/hitlertoc.html) called for new elections in an effort to get full control of the Reichstag, the German parliament, for the Nazis. The Nazis used the government apparatus to terrorize the other parties. They arrested their leaders and banned their political meetings. Then, in the midst of the election campaign, on February 27, [1933](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/Chronology_1933.html), the Reichstag building burned. A Dutchman named Marinus van der Lubbe was arrested for the crime, and he swore he had acted alone. Although many suspected the Nazis were ultimately responsible for the act, the Nazis managed to blame the Communists, thus turning more votes their way.

The fire signaled the demise of German democracy. On the next day, the government, under the pretense of controlling the Communists, abolished individual rights and protections: freedom of the press, assembly, and expression were nullified, as well as the right to privacy. When the elections were held on March 5, the Nazis received nearly 44 percent of the vote, and with 8 percent offered by the Conservatives, won a majority in the government.

The Nazis moved swiftly to consolidate their power into a dictatorship. On March 23, the Enabling Act was passed. It sanctioned [Hitler’s](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/hitlertoc.html) dictatorial efforts and legally enabled him to pursue them further. The Nazis marshaled their formidable propaganda machine to silence their critics. They also developed a sophisticated police and military force.

The *Sturmabteilung* (S.A., Storm Troopers), a grassroots organization, helped [Hitler](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/hitlertoc.html) undermine the German democracy. The [Gestapo](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/Gestapo.html) (*Geheime Staatspolizei*, Secret State Police), a force recruited from professional police officers, was given complete freedom to arrest anyone after February 28. The [*Schutzstaffel*](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/sstoc.html) (SS, Protection Squad) served as [Hitler’s](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/hitlertoc.html) personal bodyguard and eventually controlled the [concentration camps](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/cc.html) and the [Gestapo](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/Gestapo.html). The *[Sicherheitsdienst des Reichsführers­SS](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/sd.html)* (S.D., Security Service of the SS) functioned as the Nazis' intelligence service, uncovering enemies and keeping them under surveillance.

With this police infrastructure in place, opponents of the Nazis were terrorized, beaten, or sent to one of the [concentration camps](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/cc.html) the Germans built to incarcerate them. [Dachau](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/dachautoc.html), just outside of Munich, was the first such camp built for political prisoners. Dachau's purpose changed over time and eventually became another brutal concentration camp for [Jews](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/jews.html).

By the end of [1934](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/Chronology_1934.html) [Hitler](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/hitlertoc.html) was in absolute control of Germany, and his campaign against the [Jews](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/jews.html) in full swing. The Nazis claimed the [Jews](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/jews.html) corrupted pure German culture with their "foreign" and "mongrel" influence. They portrayed the [Jews](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/jews.html) as evil and cowardly, and Germans as hardworking, courageous, and honest. The [Jews](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/jews.html), the Nazis claimed, who were heavily represented in finance, commerce, the press, literature, theater, and the arts, had weakened Germany's economy and culture. The massive government-supported propaganda machine created a racial [anti-Semitism](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/antisem.html), which was different from the long­standing anti-Semitic tradition of the Christian churches.

The superior race was the "Aryans," the Germans. The word Aryan, "derived from the study of linguistics, which started in the eighteenth century and at some point determined that the Indo-Germanic (also known as Aryan) languages were superior in their structures, variety, and vocabulary to the Semitic languages that had evolved in the Near East. This judgment led to a certain conjecture about the character of the peoples who spoke these languages; the conclusion was that the 'Aryan' peoples were likewise superior to the 'Semitic' ones" (Leni Yahil, *The Holocaust: The Fate of European Jewry*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 36).

**The Jews Are Isolated from Society**

The Nazis then combined their racial theories with the evolutionary theories of Charles Darwin to justify their treatment of the [Jews](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/jews.html). The Germans, as the strongest and fittest, were destined to rule, while the weak and racially adulterated [Jews](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/jews.html) were doomed to extinction. [Hitler](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/hitlertoc.html) began to restrict the [Jews](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/jews.html) with legislation and terror, which entailed burning books written by [Jews](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/jews.html), removing [Jews](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/jews.html) from their professions and public schools, confiscating their businesses and property and excluding them from public events. The most infamous of the anti-Jewish legislation were the [Nuremberg Laws](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/nurlawtoc.html), enacted on September 15, [1935](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/Chronology_1935.html). They formed the legal basis for the Jews' exclusion from German society and the progressively restrictive Jewish policies of the Germans.

Many [Jews](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/jews.html) attempted to flee Germany, and thousands succeeded by immigrating to such countries as [Belgium](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/vjw/Belgiumtoc.html), Czechoslovakia, [England](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/vjw/Englandtoc.html), [France](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/vjw/Francetoc.html) and [Holland](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/vjw/Nethertoc.html). It was much more difficult to get out of Europe. [Jews](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/jews.html) encountered stiff immigration quotas in most of the world's countries. Even if they obtained the necessary documents, they often had to wait months or years before leaving. Many families out of desperation sent their children first.

In July [1938](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/Chronology_1938.html), representatives of 32 countries met in the French town of [Evian](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/evian.html) to discuss the refugee and immigration problems created by the Nazis in Germany. Nothing substantial was done or decided at the Evian Conference, and it became apparent to [Hitler](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/hitlertoc.html) that no one wanted the [Jews](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/jews.html) and that he would not meet resistance in instituting his Jewish policies. By the autumn of 1941, Europe was in effect sealed to most legal emigration. The [Jews](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/jews.html) were trapped.

On November 9-10, [1938](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/Chronology_1938.html), the attacks on the [Jews](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/jews.html) became violent. Hershel Grynszpan, a 17-year-old Jewish boy distraught at the deportation of his family, shot Ernst vom Rath, the third secretary in the German Embassy in Paris, who died on November 9. Nazi hooligans used this assassination as the pretext for instigating a night of destruction that is now known as [*Kristallnacht*](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/kristalltoc.html) (the night of broken glass). They looted and destroyed Jewish homes and businesses and burned synagogues. Many [Jews](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/jews.html) were beaten and killed; 30,000 [Jews](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/jews.html) were arrested and sent to concentration camps.

**The Jews Are Confined to Ghettos**

Germany invaded [Poland](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/vjw/Polandtoc.html) in September [1939](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/Chronology_1939.html), beginning [World War II](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/wwtoc.html). Soon after, in [1940](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/Chronology_1940.html), the Nazis began establishing [ghettos](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/ghetto.html) for the [Jews of Poland](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/polandtoc.html). More than 10 percent of the Polish population was Jewish, numbering about three million. [Jews](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/jews.html) were forcibly deported from their homes to live in crowded ghettos, isolated from the rest of society.

This concentration of the Jewish population later aided the Nazis in their deportation of the [Jews](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/jews.html) to the death camps. The ghettos lacked the necessary food, water, space, and sanitary facilities required by so many people living within their constricted boundaries. Many died of deprivation and starvation.

**The “Final Solution”**

In June [1941](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/Chronology_1941.html) Germany attacked the Soviet Union and began the "[Final Solution](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/final.html)." Four mobile killing groups were formed called [*Einsatzgruppen*](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/einsatztoc.html) A, B, C and D. Each group contained several commando units. The [*Einsatzgruppen*](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/einsatztoc.html) gathered [Jews](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/jews.html) town by town, marched them to huge pits dug earlier, stripped them, lined them up, and shot them with automatic weapons. The dead and dying would fall into the pits to be buried in mass graves. In the infamous [Babi Yar](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/babiyar.html) massacre, near [Kiev](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/vjw/ukraine.html), 30,000-35,000 [Jews](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/jews.html) were killed in two days. In addition to their operations in the Soviet Union, the [*Einsatzgruppen*](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/einsatztoc.html) conducted mass murder in eastern Poland, Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia. It is estimated that by the end of [1942](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/Chronology_1942.html), the [*Einsatzgruppen*](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/einsatztoc.html) had murdered more than 1.3 million [Jews](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/jews.html).

On January 20, [1942](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/Chronology_1942.html), several top officials of the German government met to officially coordinate the military and civilian administrative branches of the Nazi system to organize a system of mass murder of the [Jews](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/jews.html). This meeting, called the [Wannsee Conference](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/Wannsee_Protocol.html), "marked the beginning of the full-scale, comprehensive extermination operation [of the [Jews](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/jews.html)] and laid the foundations for its organization, which started immediately after the conference ended" (Yahil, *The Holocaust*, p. 318).

While the Nazis murdered other national and ethnic groups, such as a number of Soviet prisoners of war, Polish intellectuals, and gypsies, only the [Jews](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/jews.html) were marked for systematic and total annihilation. [Jews](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/jews.html) were singled out for "Special Treatment" (*Sonderbehandlung*), which meant that Jewish men, women and children were to be methodically killed with poisonous gas. In the exacting records kept at the [Auschwitz](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/autoc.html) death camp, the cause of death of [Jews](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/jews.html) who had been gassed was indicated by "SB," the first letters of the two words that form the German term for "Special Treatment."

By the spring of 1942, the Nazis had established six [killing centers](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/cc.html) (death camps) in Poland: [Chelmno (Kulmhof)](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/Chelmno.html), [Belzec](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/Belzec.html), [Sobibor](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/Sobibor.html), Treblinka, [Maidanek](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/maidanek.html) and [Auschwitz](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/autoc.html). All were located near railway lines so that [Jews](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/jews.html) could be easily transported daily. A vast system of camps (called *Lagersystem*) supported the death camps. The purpose of these camps varied: some were slave labor camps, some transit camps, others concentration camps and their sub­camps, and still others the notorious death camps. Some camps combined all of these functions or a few of them. All the camps were intolerably brutal.

The major concentration camps were Ravensbruck, Neuengamme, Bergen-Belsen, [Sachsenhausen](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/Sach.html), Gross-Rosen, [Buchenwald](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/buchtoc.html), [Theresienstadt](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/terezin.html), Flossenburg, Natzweiler-Struthof, [Dachau](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/dachautoc.html), [Mauthausen](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/mauthfilm.html), Stutthof, and[Dora](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/dora.html)/[Nordhausen](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/Nordhausen.html).

In nearly every country overrun by the Nazis, the [Jews](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/jews.html) were forced to wear badges marking them as [Jews](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/jews.html), they were rounded up into ghettos or concentration camps and then gradually transported to the killing centers. The death camps were essentially factories for murdering [Jews](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/jews.html). The Germans shipped thousands of [Jews](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/jews.html) to them each day. Within a few hours of their arrival, the [Jews](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/=%22/jsource/jews.html%22) had been stripped of their possessions and valuables, gassed to death, and their bodies burned in specially designed crematoriums. Approximately 3.5 million [Jews](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/jews.html) were murdered in these death camps.

Many healthy, young strong [Jews](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/jews.html) were not killed immediately. The Germans' war effort and the [“Final Solution”](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/final.html) required a great deal of manpower, so the Germans reserved large pools of [Jews](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/jews.html) for slave labor. These people, imprisoned in concentration and labor camps, were forced to work in German munitions and other factories, such as I.G. Farben and Krupps, and wherever the Nazis needed laborers. They were worked from dawn until dark without adequate food and shelter. Thousands perished, literally worked to death by the Germans and their collaborators.

In the last months of [Hitler’s](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/hitlertoc.html) Reich, as the German armies retreated, the Nazis began marching the prisoners still alive in the concentration camps to the territory they still controlled. The Germans forced the starving and sick [Jews](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/jews.html) to walk hundreds of miles. Most died or were shot along the way. About a quarter of a million [Jews](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/jews.html) died on the death marches.

**Jewish Resistance**

The Germans' overwhelming repression and the presence of many collaborators in the various local populations severely limited the ability of the [Jews](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/jews.html) to resist. Jewish [resistance](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/resisttoc.html) did occur, however, in several forms. Staying alive, clean, and observing Jewish religious traditions constituted resistance under the dehumanizing conditions imposed by the Nazis. Other forms of resistance involved escape attempts from the ghettos and camps. Many who succeeded in escaping the ghettos lived in the forests and mountains in family camps and in fighting partisan units. Once free, though, the [Jews](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/jews.html) had to contend with local residents and partisan groups who were often openly hostile. [Jews](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/jews.html) also staged armed revolts in the [ghettos](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/ghetto.html) of Vilna, [Bialystok](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/bialystok.html), Bedzin-Sosnowiec, Cracow, and [Warsaw](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/warsawtoc.html).

The [Warsaw Ghetto Uprising](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/warsawtoc.html) was the largest ghetto revolt. Massive deportations (or *Aktions*) had been held in the ghetto from July to September 1942, emptying the ghetto of the majority of [Jews](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/jews.html) imprisoned there. When the Germans entered the ghetto again in January 1943 to remove several thousand more, small unorganized groups of [Jews](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/jews.html) attacked them. After four days, the Germans withdrew from the ghetto, having deported far fewer people than they had intended. The Nazis reentered the ghetto on April 19, 1943, the eve of [Passover](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/holidaya.html), to evacuate the remaining [Jews](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/jews.html) and close the ghetto. The [Jews](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/jews.html), using homemade bombs and stolen or bartered weapons, resisted and withstood the Germans for 27 days. They fought from bunkers and sewers and evaded capture until the Germans burned the ghetto building by building. By May 16 the ghetto was in ruins and the uprising crushed.

[Jews](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/jews.html) also revolted in the death camps of [Sobibor](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/Sobibor.html), Treblinka and [Auschwitz](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/autoc.html). All of these acts of [resistance](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/resisttoc.html) were largely unsuccessful in the face of the superior German forces, but they were very important spiritually, giving the [Jews](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/jews.html) hope that one day the Nazis would be defeated.

**Liberation and the End of War**

The camps were [liberated](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/libtoc.html) gradually, as the Allies advanced on the German army. For example, [Maidanek](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/maidanek.html) (near Lublin, Poland) was liberated by Soviet forces in July 1944, [Auschwitz](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/autoc.html) in January 1945 by the Soviets, [Bergen-Belsen](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/Belsentoc.html) (near Hanover, Germany) by the British in April 1945, and [Dachau](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/dachautoc.html) by the Americans in April 1945.

At the end of the war, between 50,000 and 100,000 Jewish survivors were living in three zones of occupation: American, British and Soviet. Within a year, that figure grew to about 200,000. The American zone of occupation contained more than 90 percent of the Jewish [displaced persons (DPs)](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/dptoc.html). The Jewish DPs would not and could not return to their homes, which brought back such horrible memories and still held the threat of danger from anti-Semitic neighbors. Thus, they languished in DP camps until emigration could be arranged to Palestine, and later Israel, the United States, South America and other countries. The last DP camp closed in 1957 (David S. Wyman, "The United States," in David S. Wyman, ed., *The World Reacts to the Holocaust*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996, pp. 707­10).

Below are figures for the number of [Jews](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/jews.html) murdered in each country that came under German domination. They are estimates, as are all figures relating to [Holocaust](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/holo.html) victims. The numbers given here for Czechoslovakia, [Hungary](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/vjw/Hungarytoc.html) and [Romania](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/vjw/romaniatoc.html) are based on their territorial borders before the 1938 Munich agreement. The total number of six million [Jews](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/jews.html) murdered during the [Holocaust](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/holo.html), which emerged from the [Nuremberg trials](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/crimestoc.html), is also an estimate. Numbers have ranged between five and seven million killed.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **COUNTRY** | **Jews Killed** | **Country** | **Jews Killed** |
| **Africa** | 526 | **Hungary** | 305,000 |
| **Albania** | 200 | **Italy** | 8,000 |
| **Austria** | 65,000 | **Latvia** | 85,000 |
| **Belgium** | 24,387 | **Lithuania** | 135,000 |
| **Czechoslovakia** | 277,000 | **Luxembourg** | 700 |
| **Denmark** | 77 | **Netherlands** | 106,000 |
| **Estonia** | 4,000 | **Norway** | 728 |
| **France** | 83,000 | **Poland** | 3,001,000 |
| **Germany** | 160,000 | **Romania** | 364,632 |
| **Greece** | 71,301 | **Soviet Union** | 1,500,000 |
| **Yugoslavia** | 67,122 | **TOTAL: 6,258,673** | |

# The Holocaust: What Makes the Holocaust Unique?

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| [Print Friendly and PDF](http://www.printfriendly.com/) |  |  |  |

The eminent Jewish philosopher, Emil Fackenheim, offers a concise outline of the distinguishing characteristics of the [Holocaust](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/holo.html) in his book, *To Mend the World*:

* The["Final Solution"](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/final.html) was designed to exterminate every single Jewish man, woman and child. The only Jews who would have conceivably survived had Hitler been victorious were those who somehow escaped discovery by the Nazis.
* Jewish birth (actually mere evidence of "Jewish blood") was sufficient to warrant the punishment of death. Fackenheim notes that this feature distinguished Jews from Poles and Russians who were killed because there were too many of them, and from "Aryans" who were not singled out unless they chose to single themselves out. With the possible exception of Gypsies, he adds, Jews were the only people killed for the "crime" of existing.
* The extermination of the Jews had no political or economic justification. It was not a means to any end; it was an end in itself. The killing of Jews was not considered just a part of the war effort, but equal to it; thus, resources that could have been used in the war were diverted instead to the program of extermination.
* The people who carried out the "Final Solution" were primarily average citizens. Fackenheim calls them "ordinary job holders with an extraordinary job." They were not perverts or sadists. "The tone-setters," he says, "were ordinary idealists, except that their ideals were torture and murder." Someone else once wrote that Germany was the model of civilized society. What was perverse, then, was that the Germans could work all day in the concentration camps and then go home and read Schiller and Goethe while listening to Beethoven.

Other examples of mass murder exist in human history, such as the atrocities committed by Pol Pot in Cambodia and the Turkish annihilation of the Armenians. But none of those other catastrophes, Fackenheim argues, contain more than one of the characteristics described above.

Jews do not need to compete in a morbid contest as to who has suffered the most in history. It is important, however, to explain why the Holocaust is a unique part of human history.

**Sources**: Emil Fackenheim, [*To Mend the World*](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ISBN=025332114X/theamericanisraeA/), (IN: Indiana University Press, 1994).