

Name: _____ Class: _____

Introduction to the Holocaust

By The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
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During World War II, the German government run by Adolf Hitler and his Nazi Party systematically killed around 6 million people just because of their race or other aspects of their identity. As you read, take notes on the different groups that were targeted by the Nazis during the Holocaust.

- [1] The Holocaust was the systematic, bureaucratic, state-sponsored persecution¹ and murder of six million Jews by Adolf Hitler and his Nazi regime. *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.



"Selection of Hungarian Jews at Auschwitz" by Yad Vashem is in the public domain.

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,² Jehovah’s Witnesses,³ 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 Euthanasia⁴ Program.

1. **Persecution (noun):** harassment, oppression, or mistreatment, especially because of race or religion
2. Communists support a political-economic system that seeks to get rid of private property, while socialists support a system that redistributes wealth and resources.
3. a sect of Christianity that originated in the U.S.
4. Euthanasia is a method for medically killing someone, often by deadly gas or injection.

- [5] 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 intelligentsia⁵ 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)⁶ and religious dissidents⁷ (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, SS⁸ 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 facilitate⁹ later deportation of the Jews, the Germans and their collaborators created ghettos,¹⁰ transit camps, and forced-labor camps in order to keep Jews grouped closely together during the war years. The German authorities also established numerous forced-labor camps, both in the so-called Greater German Reich¹¹ 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.

- [10] Between 1941 and 1944, Nazi German authorities deported millions of Jews from Germany, from occupied territories, and from the countries of many of its Axis¹² allies to ghettos and to killing centers, often called extermination camps, where they were murdered in specially developed gassing facilities.

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5. The intelligentsia refers to the intellectual and educated members of society.
 6. Trade unionists, also called labor unionists, are people who support the right for workers to bargain with their employers for fair wages, decent hours, and safe working conditions.
 7. Religious dissidents are people who practice religions that disagree with or branch off from long-established churches.
 8. SS stands for Schutzstaffel, armed members of Hitler's Nazi party in Germany.
 9. **Facilitate (verb):** to help with the process of doing something; to make something easier
 10. segregated neighborhoods where certain groups were forced to live
 11. The German Reich is just another name for Germany, approximately meaning “German Realm.”
 12. In World War II, Germany and its allies were called the “Axis Powers.”

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.¹³

For the western Allies, World War II officially ended in Europe on the next day, May 8, 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.

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13. In World War II, France, the United Kingdom, the United States, and the Soviet Union (Russia) were called the “Allies.”

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: What is the central idea of the text?
 - A. German Nazis killed millions of Jews and other minorities during the Holocaust.
 - B. Nazi Germany used the Holocaust to force people not born in the country to leave.
 - C. Nazi Germany first targeted political objectors to maintain order during the Holocaust.
 - D. German Nazis primarily persecuted citizens who they believed could overthrow them.

2. PART B: Which quote from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "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." (Paragraph 3)
 - B. "German police officials targeted thousands of political opponents... and religious dissidents" (Paragraph 6)
 - C. "Nazi German authorities deported millions of Jews... to ghettos and to killing centers, often called extermination camps, where they were murdered in specially developed gassing facilities" (Paragraph 10)
 - D. "Between 1948 and 1951, almost 700,000 Jews emigrated to Israel, including 136,000 Jewish displaced persons from Europe." (Paragraph 13)

3. What is the meaning of "deplorable" in paragraph 5?
 - A. horrible
 - B. mysterious
 - C. ordinary
 - D. uncomfortable

4. How does paragraph 5 contribute to the discussion of the Holocaust in the text?
 - A. It suggests that Jewish people were not the primary targets of the Holocaust.
 - B. It provides information about why Jewish people were persecuted during the Holocaust.
 - C. It suggests that the world will never know all of the people who were affected by the Holocaust.
 - D. It highlights the extent of the Nazi regime's persecution and violence against many groups of people.

5. PART A: What does the word "concentrate" most closely mean as it is used in paragraph 8?
 - A. focus
 - B. gather
 - C. protect
 - D. punish

6. PART B: Which phrase from paragraph 8 best supports the answer to Part A?
- A. "monitor the Jewish population"
 - B. "deportation of the Jews"
 - C. "keep Jews grouped closely together"
 - D. "numerous forced-labor camps"
7. Over time, groups that were targeted by the Nazi regime were —
- A. placed on a ship and sent to America.
 - B. asked to hide and change their identity.
 - C. discriminated against and eventually killed.
 - D. slowly accepted back into society by the Nazi regime.
8. How does the conclusion contribute to the overall text? (Paragraphs 11-14)
- A. It discusses how the Holocaust ended and its lasting effects.
 - B. It discusses how victims of the Holocaust were able to get justice.
 - C. It explains why a tragedy like the Holocaust could never happen again.
 - D. It emphasizes that experts will never have an accurate death toll of the Holocaust.
9. Which of the following describes the author's purpose in the text?
- A. to contemplate why the Holocaust occurred
 - B. to provide a summary of the events of the Holocaust
 - C. to show how the Holocaust has shaped modern Germany
 - D. to criticize the United States for not stopping the Holocaust sooner
10. According to the text, what was the relationship between prejudice against Jewish people and the oppression they suffered during the Holocaust? Cite evidence from the text in your response.

Discussion Questions

Directions: *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. The Nazis and people who agreed with them wanted to protect the German community from “inferior” races. Are there other examples in history or literature in which groups of people murdered innocent people in the name of “protecting” themselves? How are these examples similar to or different from the Holocaust?
2. What might have made the Nazis murder, imprison, and oppress certain people? Do you think those people were really a threat, or could there have been other motivations?
3. In the context of this article, what makes people do bad things? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.
4. The Holocaust is taught in history classes today so that people will never forget. Although it is not pleasant to hear about the murder of millions of people because of their religion, race, or beliefs, educators believe it is important to study. What can we learn from tragedy, and why is it important to study tragic history?