

The Holocaust

Nazi Racial Policy and Genocide

The Nazi concentration camps were infamous for targeting a number of ethnic and cultural groups. Gypsies and Slavs were among the peoples the Nazis considered to be “subhuman” or “undesirable.” Most all the Nazis hated the Jews. After Hitler’s rise to power in 1933, the Nazis passed a number of anti-Semitic policies that grew worse over time. The worst were the Nuremberg Laws in 1935, which deprived all Jews of their civil rights. Before the war violence against the Jews was not yet an official policy, even though in reality thousands of Jews and Jewish residences and businesses were being harassed, vandalized and destroyed during the late 1930s. The worst of these moments came in November 1938, on Kristallnacht, also called the Night of Broken Glass, when Jewish shops, synagogues and homes throughout Germany and Austria were attacked and destroyed in one night.

It was during the war the Nazi anti-Semitic policy escalated to genocide. There were 11 million Jews in Europe before the beginning of WWII. In 1939 and 1940, as Germany began to conquer Europe, Nazi authorities began to round Jews up and detain them, either in ghettos or preexisting concentration camps throughout Europe. It was sometime in 1941 that the order of genocide came down from above. Although no written orders survive, it is certain that, ultimately, the command was issued by Hitler himself.

1. Who did Hitler and the Nazis target?
2. What policies and events were used by the Germans to discriminate the Jews?

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The Nazi genocidal policy is popularly referred to by the name given to it by the Jews: the Holocaust. The Nazis themselves referred to it as the “Final Solution.” Whatever the name, it evolved according to the following steps:

1939-1940:

- i Jews were forced to wear the star of David to identify themselves
- ii Polish Jews were rounded up and placed in ghettos
- iii Other European Jews were imprisoned in concentration and transit camps
- iv Some Jews were sporadically executed or died by random violence

1941:

- a) Hitler ordered through secret documents, the execution of Communist Party members
- b) In July, the plans for the Final Solution were handed down to the SS
- c) The Nazis organized “special action squads” to execute mass numbers of Jews

1. What were some changes that occurred to the Jews in Europe between 1939 and 1941?
2. What was the ultimate goal of all these policies?

Medical Experiments

In 1941 the Germans began to experiment of Jews to locate the fastest method for extermination. The first tests were with gases like carbon monoxide and others that were used in the first gas chambers. These gases were too slow for the Nazis. The Nazis eventually perfected a cyanide based insecticide called Zyklon-B. This was an extremely fast method of extermination and became a fixture in all Nazi death camps. The purpose was to develop fast modes of killing, so the Nazis also tested cremation techniques and began to design camps that would be used primarily for execution.

In 1942 Nazi officials met at the Wannsee Conference. At this conference the Nazis agreed to use special camps that were already under construction in German-held Poland. The purpose was for the express elimination of the Jews and other undesirables. There were many camps built throughout Poland, Germany and Austria, but the most infamous concentration camp was Auschwitz. It is said that over 2,000,000 people died at Auschwitz alone.

1. What was the main purpose for the Nazi experiments?
2. What did the Nazis develop to carry out their plans?

The Final Years 1943-1945

During 1943, Jews from all over Europe were shipped to the extermination camps. Other victims of Nazi racism were sent there as well. Millions were gassed, their bodies were processed and their remains were cremated. But the war was ending for the Nazis and the plan for the Final Solution began to unravel in 1944. In 1944 the Soviets began to liberate concentration camps in Poland, and by mid-1945 all of the concentration camps were freed by Allied forces.

In the end, the Final Solution resulted in 12 million deaths. Of Europe's 11 million Jews, approximately 6 million were killed during the Holocaust. In addition, 6 million non-Jewish victims perished. To punish these crimes, the U.S, Britain, and the Soviets staged court cases called the Nuremberg Trials. Set up in 1946, the remaining Nazi military leadership and officials were tried. The Nuremberg Trials used the term "crimes against humanity" to describe the actions of the Nazis. In 1948, in a collective effort to avoid such atrocities in the future, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guaranteed the right of life to everyone. If these laws were broken, the violators would now suffer harsh penalties.

1. When did liberation begin and who was responsible?
2. What was the purpose of the Nuremberg trials?
3. What was the purpose of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights?