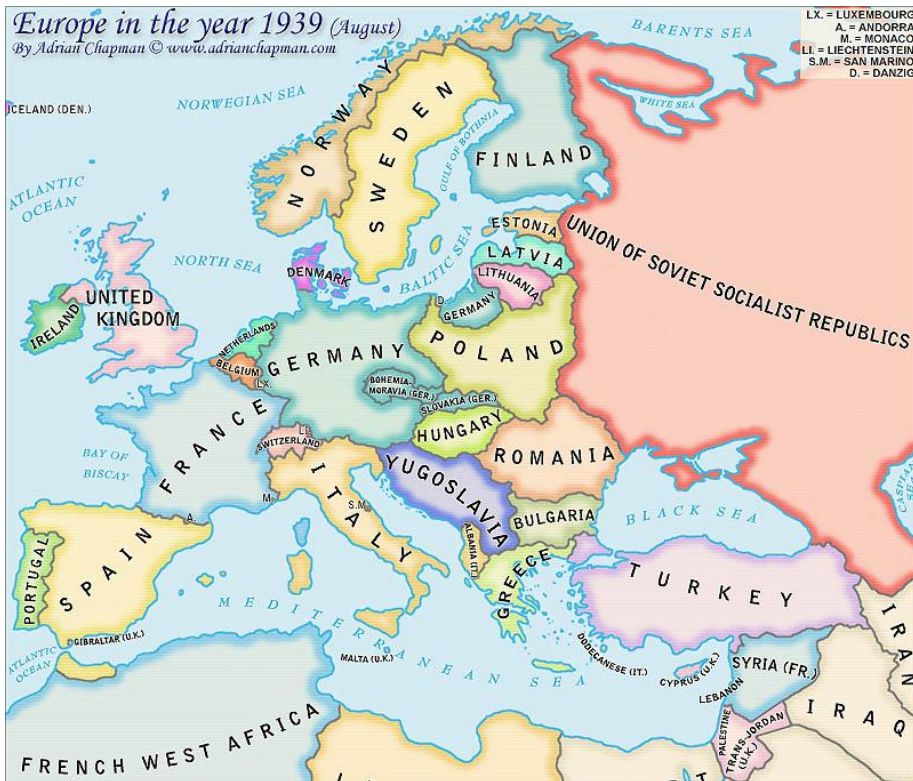


WHAT WAS THE HOLOCAUST?

The Holocaust was the systematic, government-sponsored persecution and murder of approximately six million Jews by the Nazi regime and its collaborators. *Holocaust* is a word of Greek origin meaning *sacrifice by fire*. The Holocaust is sometimes referred to as *Shoah*, the Hebrew term meaning *catastrophe*. The Nazis and their leader, Adolph Hitler came to power in Germany in January 1933. Their goal was to create *Lebensraum* ("living space") for the Aryan people, whom they professed to be racially superior. This ideology of racial supremacy was central to the Nazi's distorted world view and eventually led to the persecution of 17 million people.¹



Europe on the eve of World War II

THE FINAL SOLUTION

In 1933, the Jewish population of Europe stood at over 9,000,000. Most European Jews lived in countries that Nazi Germany came to occupy or influence during World War II. By 1945, when the war ended, the Germans and their collaborators killed nearly two out of every three European Jews as part of the "Final Solution."

The Final Solution was Nazi Germany's plan and execution of the systematic genocide of European Jews during World War II, resulting in the most deadly phase of the Holocaust. Heinrich Himmler was the chief architect of the plan, and the German Nazi leader, Adolf Hitler, termed it "the final solution of the Jewish question."²

All Jews, regardless of their station in life or profession, were destined for total systematic annihilation because of their racial origin. Other victims included Roma (Gypsies), the mentally and physically disabled, Jehovah Witnesses, Communists, Socialists, homosexuals, priests and nuns, the Polish elite, resistance fighters and criminals or enemies of the Third Reich. Estimates indicate that 6 million Jews and 5 million non-Jews were murdered. The largest group of non-Jews killed was Russian soldiers, POWs slaughtered or marched to death.

Concentration Camps in Europe



Major concentration camps are indicated in capital letters & large dots on this map. Smaller, satellite camps are indicated by lower case letters & small dots.

Following the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, *Einsatzgruppen* (mobile killing units) and later, militarized battalions, moved behind German lines to carry out mass murder operations against Jews. German SS and police units murdered millions and deported millions more from Germany, occupied territories, and from the countries of many of its allies. These victims were sent to ghettos and to killing centers, (*extermination camps*), where they were murdered in specially developed gassing facilities.

THE END OF THE HOLOCAUST

A small number of Jews and other victims were able to flee and hide. Many non Jews, often called “righteous Gentiles”, helped save thousands of Jews. (Special honors are bestowed upon these individuals by Yad Vashem, the Israeli national authority for Holocaust remembrance.)

Entry to safe havens, desperately sought by Jews during the Holocaust, was denied by countries around the world. Conferences held in Evian, France (1938) and Bermuda (1943) to solve the refugee problem did not develop a solution.

Despite the horrendous conditions to which Jews were subjected, many engaged in armed resistance against the Nazis. Ghetto revolts, resistance in concentration camps and death camps and partisan warfare took place against overwhelming odds.

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. For the western Allies, World War II officially ended in Europe on the next day, May 8 (V-E Day), 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.

Estimated Number of Jews Murdered.³

| Country | Estimated pre-war population | Estimated Jewish population murdered | Percent Dead |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------|
| Poland | 3,300,000 | 3,000,000 | 90% |
| Germany | 240,000 | 210,000 | 90% |
| Baltic countries | 253,000 | 228,000 | 90% |
| Bohemia/Moravia (now Czech Republic) | 90,000 | 80,000 | 89% |
| Slovakia | 90,000 | 75,000 | 83% |
| Greece | 70,000 | 54,000 | 77% |
| Netherlands | 140,000 | 105,000 | 75% |
| Hungary | 650,000 | 450,000 | 70% |
| Belgium | 65,000 | 40,000 | 60% |
| Yugoslavia | 43,000 | 26,000 | 60% |
| Rumania | 600,000 | 300,000 | 50% |

A FINAL NOTE

Despite the U.S. taking the lead in WW II to fight Germany and their allies, we did not welcome refugees. Throughout the war, the U.S. accepted fewer than 1,000 European refugees. The history of the Holocaust is a dark reminder of what happens when universal moral and human principles are challenged. It is the responsibility of all people to act against intolerance and hatred and promote democratic ideals.

REFERENCES¹Nicosia, Francis R., & Niewyk, Donald L. (2000). *The Columbia Guide to the Holocaust*. New York: Columbia University Press.

²Jewish Virtual Library (2011). The American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise. <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/index.html>

³Dawidowicz, Lucy S. (1975) *The War Against the Jews: 1933-1945*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, Winston. The estimated number of Jewish fatalities during the Holocaust is usually given as between 5.1 and 6 million victims. However, despite the availability of numerous scholarly works and archival sources on the subject, Holocaust-related figures might never be definitively known. Furthermore, it is important to keep in mind that the available Holocaust statistics include a wide margin of error because 1) not all victims of the Holocaust were registered; 2) countless records that did exist were destroyed by the Nazis, or lost, burned, or damaged in military actions; and 3) records often contain fragmentary information, failing to include, for example, the victim's ethnic, national, or religious affiliation.