

THE HOLOCAUST:

The Destruction of European Jewry



THE NAZIS RESERVED THEIR MOST VICIOUS HATRED AND SYSTEMATIC GENOCIDAL plans for the Jews. Indeed, many of the measures they carried out against other groups—the imprisonment of political opponents or social nonconformers; the sterilization and murder of those with mental and physical disabilities; and the arrest, imprisonment, deportation, and murder of other so-called racial enemies—set the economic and social conditions; prepared the psychological ground; and offered the national security, military, and practical precedent for the mass killing of the Jews. The Nazis devoted themselves to this task as a priority and with a determination unmatched in the historical record. The success of their actions resulted in the almost complete annihilation of Jewish life and culture in Europe.

Nazi antisemitism grew out of a centuries-old tradition of hatred and fear of Jews as a religious, social, and cultural minority in Europe. Although Christianity began as a Jewish sect, Christians believed that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah and his arrival was the fulfillment of God’s covenant with the people of Israel and of the Hebrew scriptures. Convinced that their religion superseded and replaced the Judaic faith, devout Christians further believed that the Jewish people were destined to wander the earth until they converted to Christianity. Jews were also vilified as “Christ-killers” and were blamed for the crucifixion.

In 70 C.E., Jews living in the province of Judea (now Israel) in the Roman Empire revolted against oppressive measures and were crushed by the legions of the Emperor Titus. His soldiers sacked the city of Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple, and banished the Jews from their holy land to the far reaches of Europe and Asia, scattering them from present-day Portugal to present-day Iran. They joined other Jews in exile, also known as the Diaspora, living among majority populations who did not share their beliefs and who often viewed them with suspicion and mistrust.

In 380 C.E., Christianity became the official state religion of the Roman Empire. In the centuries that followed, the Church was a powerful institution, aligned throughout Europe with the governing authorities. Jews were forced to the margins of society and banished to the role of perennial outsider. Most of the social, economic, and political restrictions against Jews had the explicit sanction of church leaders. Seminal Christian thinkers from Augustine in the fifth century to Martin Luther in the sixteenth denounced the Jews even as they sought to convert them. Increasingly, European culture understood itself as explicitly “Christian,” and Jews were characterized as alien, inferior, disloyal, exploitative.

The status of Jews in western Europe remained tenuous until the modern era. With the English civil war in the seventeenth century and the French Revolution in 1789, Britain and France formed the vanguard of the emancipation movement, which gave civil and legal equality to Jews as religious kingdoms gave way to the modern national state.

By the late nineteenth century, Jews throughout western and central Europe had gained the same rights. Austria-Hungary granted equal rights to Jews in 1867; the newly united German Empire followed suit in 1871. Nevertheless, emancipation did not completely eliminate social discrimination and antisemitism. For generations, Europeans had feared and mistrusted Jews, seeing them as fundamentally foreign, untrustworthy, and inferior. Emancipation could not change the public perception overnight. At the same time, the legal foundation of equality allowed Jews to gradually assimilate into the larger cultural mainstream and to compete with Christians for job opportunities and careers, particularly in middle-class professions. Although antisemitism remained present throughout European societies and although members of all social groups held anti-Jewish opinions, Jews, nevertheless, were gaining status and security as the nineteenth century ended.

In contrast, most East European Jews, which before 1914 included the Jews of Russia, Romania, and the eastern borderlands of the German Empire and the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, lived in small, tightly knit communities called *shtetls*. They were separated from their Christian neighbors by virtue of faith, culture, and language. They maintained traditional religious observances and spoke in a German dialect called Yiddish. Although they, too, were granted equal citizenship rights in the aftermath of World War I, most Jews in Poland, Romania, Russia, and elsewhere still faced poverty, severe discrimination in the public and private sectors, and periodic outbreaks of mass violence known as *pogroms*. At the same time, in both East and West Europe, Jewish religious life, tradition, and culture remained rich and vibrant. Jewish artists, writers, scholars, and scientists thrived and made significant contributions to their fields of endeavor.

HERBERT MOSHEIM (second from the left) poses in costume with friends during *Karneval* (also known as *Fasching* or *Fastnacht*), which, like Mardi Gras, is a time of wild celebration, costume balls, and revelry leading up to the beginning of Lent. German Jews participated fully in the country's public life, and it was not unusual for assimilated Jewish families to take part in Christian holidays such as *Karneval* and Christmas. GERMANY, 1929–32. USHMM, COURTESY OF SUSAN MOSHEIM ALTERMAN



In 1933, the approximately 530,000 Jews in Germany constituted less than 1 percent of the total population of 67 million people. This relatively small minority was generally integrated in society; they tended to be proud of their citizenship in a country that had produced many great poets, writers, musicians, and artists. About 100,000 German Jews—a high percentage given their numbers—served in the German armed forces in World War I. Between 30,000 and 35,000 were decorated for bravery; some 12,000 died fighting. German Jews served in high public office; taught in universities; and were active in the arts, the sciences, the professions, and commerce. Of the 38 Nobel Prizes won by German writers and scientists between 1905 and 1936, 14 were awarded to Jews. During the first third of the twentieth century, intermarriage had become more common; often, Jews in such relationships converted to Christianity and raised their children in their new faith. Although some German Jews continued to encounter discrimination in their social lives and professional careers, many remained confident of their future under Weimar democracy. They spoke the German language and regarded the country as their home. Their identities as Germans seemed secure.

That confidence was badly shaken by the rise of the Nazi party and the appointment of Hitler as chancellor of Germany. Little more than a radical fringe element just five years earlier, Hitler and the Nazis were the largest and most powerful political party in the German parliament by 1933. From this newly won position of strength, many radicals within the Nazi movement were impatient to enact their long-standing agenda. Within the framework of Nazi ideology, nothing was more central than antisemitism—it served as impetus, rationale, and justification for virtually every major element of the party platform. Once in power, Hitler encouraged latent currents of anti-Jewish feeling in Germany and built upon those currents and other fears and prejudices to create and implement policies of exclusion, isolation, and eventually murder.

The nature of Nazi antisemitism is difficult to grapple with, in part because it was at one and the same time an outgrowth of the historical past and a relatively new formulation that diverged significantly from traditional manifestations of antisemitism. Historian Raul Hilberg proposed a framework that places the Nazis' beliefs and actions in the context of the whole history of Christian-based and secular antisemitism. He presents three successive trends: first, the Church attempted to convert Jews to Christianity; second, when mass conversion proved impossible and unsuccessful, the Church and then the secular leaders that followed it set out to banish the Jews from their midst by excluding them, segregating them, and forcing them into exile; third, when this effort failed to solve the so-called Jewish problem, the Nazis resolved to kill them. As Hilberg put it:

Since the fourth century after Christ, there have been three anti-Jewish policies: conversion, expulsion, and annihilation. The second appeared as an alternative to the first, and the third emerged as an alternative to the second. [...] The missionaries of Christianity had said in effect: You have no right to live among us as Jews. The secular rulers who followed had proclaimed: You have no right to live among us. The Nazis at last decreed: You have no right to live.

ANTISEMITIC POLICIES IN NAZI GERMANY, 1933–39

The Nazis did not take long to translate their antisemitic ideology into action. Over the course of the first 60 days of the Nazi regime, radicals within the party and its paramilitary organization, the SA (*Sturmabteilungen*), commonly known as storm troopers, attacked those who “looked Jewish.” When reports of the street violence reached Great Britain and the United States, pressure mounted for an embargo of German-made goods, though no action was taken. In response, Hitler then ordered a boycott of Jewish-owned businesses in Germany. Calling the images of Jews being humiliated by Nazi storm troopers “atrocious propaganda,” Hitler framed the boycott as a protest against Jewish efforts to tarnish the reputation of Germany abroad.

The boycott was the first public, nationwide move against the German Jewish community organized by the Nazi party. It began on the morning of Saturday April 1, 1933, as party radicals, storm troopers, and SS (*Schutzstaffel*), the elite guard of the Nazi party, paraded down the streets, warning the population not to shop in stores owned by Jews, and then blocked entrances to thousands of Jewish-owned businesses across the country. They painted Stars of David in yellow and black across doors and windows and carried signs emblazoned with antisemitic slogans.

Popular reaction was mixed. In many places, spontaneous violence erupted against Jews. Some Germans, however, made it a point of honor to enter Jewish-owned shops or to call on Jewish friends. Others complained that the Nazi rowdies disrupted their lives and contributed to public disorder. Many people continued to shop in their favorite stores regardless of the boycott. Reactions in the press outside Germany were almost universally disapproving.

Despite the mixed results, the Nazis predictably proclaimed the boycott a success. Less than a week later, Hitler issued the Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service, which required, with a few exceptions, compulsory dismissal of Jews and other “non-Aryans” and of alleged political opponents of the nation from all government positions. This step



marked the beginning of a pattern that would repeat itself in years to come: anti-Jewish agitation from party activists, sanctioned by Hitler and the Nazi leadership, would consistently prompt the state bureaucracy to develop and implement discriminatory legislation against Jews and to prepare the German population to accept those “legal” measures. At the same time, because of the ambivalent response on the part of German citizenry to the April boycott, Hitler refrained from issuing further public policy statements about Jews. Over the next two years, Nazi anti-Jewish policy was generally characterized by the imposition of quotas in higher education; exclusion of Jews from state employment, the professions, and social organizations; and preferential treatment for non-Jews in a broad range of areas.

HANNE HIRSCH LIEBMANN (left) was born to a Jewish family in the German city of Karlsruhe in November 1924. Her father, Max, was a photographer. When he died in 1925, Hanne’s mother, Ella, continued to maintain his studio. In 1930, Hanne began public school. Three years later, she experienced the boycott against Jewish businesses in Germany and the rising wave of antisemitism in her native country.

In April 1933, our studio, like the other Jewish businesses in Karlsruhe, was plastered with signs during the anti-Jewish boycott: “Don’t buy from Jews.” At school, a classmate made me so furious with her taunts that I ripped her sweater. After the November 1938 pogroms, the studio was busy making photos for the new ID cards marked “J” that Jews had to carry. The studio remained open until December 31 when all Jewish businesses had to be closed.

In 1940, Hanne was deported to the French-run detention camp of Gurs. Under the auspices of the Children’s Aid Society, she eventually was sheltered in the French village of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon. After 1942, when roundups in France intensified, she was taken in by two different farming families. In early 1943, she escaped to Switzerland. Immediately after the war ended, she married Max Liebmann, and three years later she emigrated with her husband and daughter to the United States. LE CHAMBON, FRANCE, OCTOBER 18, 1942. USHMM, COURTESY OF JACK LEWIN

The 1933 pattern was repeated in 1935. After a spring and summer marred by both spontaneous and organized street violence against Jews throughout Germany, Hitler

decreed and the Reich parliament enacted two laws on September 15, 1935, at the annual Nazi party rally in the city of Nuremberg. The Reich Citizenship Law and the Law for the Protection of German Blood and Honor would become the centerpiece of anti-Jewish legislation in Germany. Generally known as the Nuremberg Laws, the decrees defined who was and was not a Jew, and thus it clearly delineated between those who were encircled in the protective shelter of the state and those who were outside it. Under the Reich Citizenship Law, only people of “German or kindred blood” could claim the status of Reich citizen. German Jews were relegated to “subjects of the state” overnight.

The Law for the Protection of German Blood and Honor went on to legalize the segregation of Jewish and non-Jewish Germans by banning intermarriage and redefining sexual relations between them as “racial defilement,” a crime that could be prosecuted. It also forbade German Jews to employ female non-Jewish household servants under the age of 45.

Throughout the centuries of antisemitic persecution in Europe, never before had a need to legally define Jewishness existed. Jews were guided in their behavior and customs by the principles of religious law and by generations of tradition. Those elements shaped virtually every aspect of daily life, including the clothing Jews wore, the language they spoke, the food they ate, and the holidays they celebrated. For hundreds of years, in concrete ways, and for better or worse, Jews were different and largely recognizable. By the time the Nazis took power, things had changed in Germany and elsewhere in Europe. No longer obvious outsiders, many Jews had given up the traditional ways and had adopted the cultural norms of mainstream society. Many abandoned the practice of Judaism and celebrated secular and Christian holidays, especially Christmas. In this context, identifying a Jew was not always easy. In the culture of fear and suspicion that the Nazis cultivated, they persuaded the German people that nothing was more important than knowing one’s enemies. The Jews among them had to be identifiable once again.

Defining Jewishness was not easy. The Nazis rejected the long-standing view of Jews as members of a religious group and a cultural community. Instead, in keeping with their ideology of racial struggle, they insisted that Jewishness was conferred by birth and defined by blood descent. In their efforts to impose this new framework, however, the Nazis faced a problem. In spite of elaborate efforts to prove a biological essence of Jewishness using the pseudo-science of race hygiene, scientists could find no physical distinction between Jews and Germans. The Nazis, determined to define Jews as a race, sought to find their way around the problem by looking to familial ancestry, rather than personal religious observance or belief, as the solution.

Under the Nuremberg Laws, people with three or more grandparents born into the Jewish religious community counted as Jews in Nazi Germany. Although the Nazis called

this a “racial” definition for propagandistic reasons, they depended, in fact, on membership in the Jewish community—rather than blood type, physical characteristics, or other so-called racial identifiers—as the source of a person’s origins. The starting point for Jewish identity was establishing religious affiliation—two generations back—and then defining those people’s grandparents as “racially” Jewish. Furthermore, the general principle led to elaborate variations, including certain exceptions and definitions of those who were “part-Jewish” (*Mischlinge*). Despite the persistent rhetoric of Nazi ideology, no scientifically valid basis existed for designating Jews as a race.

The Nazis’ action had the net effect of imposing a Jewish identity on tens of thousands of people who did not think of themselves as Jews or who had no religious and cultural ties to that community. Furthermore, the law classified as Jews many who had converted from Judaism or even whose parents or grandparents had adopted another religion. Thus, practicing Roman Catholics and Protestants—even priests, ministers, and nuns—suddenly found themselves defined as Jews and, just as abruptly, stripped of their citizenship and deprived of their basic rights.

The Nuremberg Laws, in effect, reversed emancipation and unraveled the gains that Jews had made in Germany over the previous century. Still worse, they laid the foundation for future antisemitic measures by unequivocally dividing the nation into “Aryan” Germans and Jews. For the first time in history, Jews were oppressed not for what they believed, but for who they—or their parents—were by birth. As a result, the terms of the law made Jewish identity impossible to deny or alter, representing a fundamental break with the antisemitism of the past. In Nazi Germany, no profession of belief, no change of affinity, and no act or statement on the part of a Jew could release him or her from the destiny decreed by the state.

In Nazi Germany, propaganda was the face and voice of the Nazi party, constantly reminding the German people how they must think and act. In March 1933, shortly after the Nazis seized power, Hitler had established a Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda headed by Joseph Goebbels. Its aim was to ensure that the Nazi message was successfully communicated through the news media (radio and print journalism) and educational material, as well as through art, music, theater, films, books, and other forms of entertainment. Hitler described the function of propaganda in *Mein Kampf*, when he advocated its use to spread the Nazi ideals of racism, antisemitism, and anti-Bolshevism. “Propaganda attempts to force a doctrine on the whole people,” he wrote; “propaganda works on the general public from the standpoint of an idea and makes them ripe for the victory of this idea.”

Propaganda addressed all aspects of daily life. Within this overwhelming barrage of political, social, and cultural pressure, the Nazis orchestrated an antisemitic propaganda

campaign designed to cultivate fear and hatred of Jews. Nazi propaganda attempted to convince ordinary Germans that Jews were an alien people, who were separate from and hostile to the nation and to the German “Aryan” race. Images depicted Jews as grotesque caricatures and presented them as scheming, cunning profiteers who fed off Germany for their own ends. Jews were portrayed as the antithesis of the pure “Aryan” German, who was tall, muscular, and fair, with finely chiseled features, and who was usually shown working at physical labor in the service of the nation. Propaganda artists established a visual vocabulary that worked on the German collective psyche, thus linking the image of “Aryans” with the beautiful, the good, and the noble and, conversely, associating Jews with ugliness, dishonesty, greed, and destructiveness. This two-pronged approach—the glorification of the Nazi regime, its leaders, and its goals, on one hand, and the intense vilification of its so-called enemies, on the other—left no room for ambiguity in the public imagination. Above all, anti-Jewish propaganda sent a message to Germans that the Jews were an enemy lying in wait, plotting to harm the Fatherland. Every aspect of Nazi anti-semitic propaganda was coordinated to ensure that Germans would fear and despise the Jews and would eventually accept legal measures against them.

Another way in which the Nazis secured public acceptance of antisemitic policy was by gradually, incrementally, and unrelentingly implementing anti-Jewish legislation. During the first six years of Hitler’s dictatorship, from 1933 until the outbreak of war in 1939, Jews felt the effects of more than 400 decrees and regulations that restricted all aspects of their public and private lives. Many of those laws were national ones that had been issued by the German administration and affected all Jews. But state, regional, and municipal officials, on their own initiative, also promulgated a barrage of exclusionary decrees against Jews in their own communities. Thus, hundreds of individuals in all levels of government throughout the country were involved in the persecution of Jews as they conceived, discussed, drafted, adopted, enforced, and supported anti-Jewish legislation. No corner of Germany was left untouched.

The first wave of legislation, from 1933 to 1934, focused largely on limiting the participation of Jews in German public life. As described previously, the April 1933 Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service forced half of the approximately 5,000 Jewish government employees out of their jobs. During the same year, the city of Berlin forbade Jewish lawyers and notaries to work on legal matters, the mayor of Munich disallowed Jewish doctors from treating non-Jewish patients, and the Bavarian Interior Ministry denied admission of Jewish students to medical school. At the national level, the Nazi government revoked the licenses of Jewish tax consultants; imposed a 1.5 percent quota on admission of “non-Aryans” to public schools and universities; fired Jewish civilian workers from

the army; and, in early 1934, forbade Jewish actors to perform on the stage or screen. Local governments also issued regulations that affected other spheres of Jewish life: in Saxony, Jews could no longer slaughter animals according to ritual purity requirements, effectively preventing them from obeying the Jewish dietary laws.

The Nuremberg Laws of 1935 heralded a new wave of antisemitic legislation that brought about immediate and concrete segregation: Jewish patients were no longer admitted to municipal hospitals in Dusseldorf, German court judges could not cite legal commentaries or opinions written by Jewish authors, Jewish officers were expelled from the army, and Jewish university students were not allowed to sit for doctoral exams. Other regulations reinforced the message that Jews were outsiders in Germany; for example, in December 1935, the Reich Propaganda Ministry issued a decree forbidding Jewish soldiers to be named among the dead in World War I memorials.

Government agencies at all levels aimed to exclude Jews from the economic sphere of Germany by preventing them from earning a living. Jews were required to register their domestic and foreign property and assets, a prelude to the gradual expropriation of their material wealth by the state. Likewise, the German authorities intended to “Aryanize” all Jewish businesses, a process involving the dismissal of Jewish workers and managers, as well as the transfer of companies and enterprises to non-Jewish Germans, who bought them at prices officially fixed well below market value. From April 1933 to April 1938, “Aryanization” effectively reduced the number of Jewish-owned businesses in Germany by approximately two-thirds.

By 1938, the signs grew still more foreboding as the government required Jews to identify themselves in ways that would permanently separate them from the rest of the population. In January, they were prohibited by law from changing their personal names and the following April from altering the names of their businesses. Then, in August, Jews whose names were not considered ethnically identifiable were required to adopt the middle name Israel (for men) and Sara (for women). Finally, in October, Jews were required to revalidate their passports, a procedure that involved marking the document with a large red J.

This legislative assault had a powerful psychological component, which not only worked against the Jews but also implicated the German citizenry. The government issued laws gradually over a span of many years, and this incremental quality served to camouflage the escalation that was, in fact, taking place. In that way, much of the non-Jewish German public—as well as many Jews—were lulled into a false sense of complacency, thus accommodating and normalizing each individual step. For the Nazis, however, each law facilitated still more restrictive measures that weakened and demoralized individual

Jews and the community as a whole while increasing the divide between Jews and non-Jews. Moreover, the economic benefits that many non-Jewish Germans drew from the consequences of this legislation reinforced their personal stake and interest in the survival of the Nazi regime.

Until Nazi Germany started World War II in 1939, antisemitic legislation in Germany served to “encourage” and ultimately to force a mass emigration of German Jews. The Nazi government did all it could to induce the Jews to leave Germany. In addition to making life miserable, the German authorities reduced bureaucratic hurdles so those who wanted to leave could do so more easily. At the same time, the Nazis viewed the Jews’ belongings and their financial capital as German property, and they had no intention of allowing refugees to take anything of material value with them. Most of those who fled had to relinquish title to homes and businesses, and were subject to increasingly heavy emigration taxes that reduced their assets. Furthermore, the German authorities restricted how much money could be transferred abroad from German banks, and they allowed each passenger to take only ten reichsmarks (about U.S. \$4) out of the country. Most German Jews who managed to emigrate were completely impoverished by the time they were able to leave.

A refugee girl (left) arrives in Harwich, Great Britain, as part of a *Kindertransport* (Children’s Transport) on December 2, 1938. For humanitarian reasons, Great Britain allowed the immigration of approximately 10,000 unaccompanied Jewish children from Nazi Germany. A similar provision providing a haven for Jewish children fleeing Nazi Germany, the Wagner-Rogers Act, failed in Congress in the United States. HARWICH, GREAT BRITAIN, DECEMBER 2, 1938. USHMM, COURTESY OF STADTMUSEUM BADEN-BADEN

Many nations in which the German Jews sought asylum imposed significant obstacles to immigration. Application processes for entry visas were elaborate and demanding,

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requiring prospective immigrants to provide information about themselves and their family members from banks, doctors, and the German police. In the case of the United States, applicants were required to provide affidavits from multiple sponsors and to have secured a waiting number within a quota established for their country of birth, which severely limited their chances to emigrate. All this red tape existed against the backdrop of other hardships: competition with thousands of equally desperate people, slow mail that made communication with would-be sponsors difficult, financial hardships, and oppressive measures in Germany that made even the simplest task a chore. Finally, many who wanted to flee had, by necessity, to apply to numerous countries for entry. It is no wonder that for many Jews in Germany in the 1930s, the attempt to emigrate was more than a full-time job.

The years in the late 1930s were particularly ill-suited for a major refugee crisis. A severe worldwide economic depression reinforced through Europe and the United States an existing fear and mistrust of foreigners in general, as well as antisemitism in particular. Above all, people were wary of immigrants who might compete for their jobs, burden their already beleaguered social services, or be tempted as impoverished workers by the promises of labor agitators or domestic Communist movements. Even government officials in democratic countries were not immune to those sentiments. Most foreign countries, including the United States, Canada, and Great Britain, were unwilling to increase their immigrant quotas to admit very large groups of refugees, especially the impoverished and the dispossessed. Indeed, the United States refused to reduce the myriad obstacles to getting an immigrant visa, with the result that until 1938, the immigration quota for Germany was unfilled. Many German Jews who were in immediate danger were forced to emigrate elsewhere, such as France, Holland, and Czechoslovakia, where eventually the wave of German conquest overtook them.

The bureaucratic hurdles for emigration were overwhelming. Far from streamlining the process to allow more refugees to enter, nations required extensive documentation that was often virtually impossible to obtain. In some cases, refugees literally faced a “catch-22”: proof of passage booked on a ship was required for a visa, and proof of a visa was required to book passage on a ship.

The following is a list of the documents required by the United States to obtain a visa:

- Five copies of the visa application
- Two copies of applicant’s birth certificate
- Quota number (establishing the applicant’s place on the waiting list)
- Two sponsors:

- Close relatives of the prospective immigrant were preferred
- The sponsors were required to be U.S. citizens or to have permanent resident status, and they were required to have completed and notarized six copies of an Affidavit of Support and Sponsorship
- Supporting documents:
 - Certified copy of most recent federal tax return
 - Affidavit from a bank regarding applicant’s accounts
 - Affidavit from any other responsible person regarding other assets, (affidavit from sponsor’s employer or statement of commercial rating)
- Certificate of Good Conduct from German Police authorities, including two copies of each:
 - Police dossier
 - Prison record
 - Military record
 - Other government records about individual
- Affidavits of Good Conduct (after September 1940) from several responsible disinterested persons
- Physical examination at U.S. consulate
- Proof of permission to leave Germany (imposed September 30, 1939)
- Proof that prospective immigrant had booked passage to the Western hemisphere (imposed September 1939)

After Germany annexed Austria in March 1938 and Nazi-sponsored street violence in both Austria and Germany dramatically increased the numbers of German and Austrian Jews seeking to emigrate, pressure mounted on U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt to address the intensified refugee crisis. He responded by proposing an international conference to be held in the French resort town of Evian-les-Bains on July 6–15, 1938. At the same time, the tenor of the invitation was indicative of U.S. and international ambivalence about the refugee situation. Thirty-three nations were invited with the reassurance that “no country will be expected ... to receive a greater number of immigrants than is permitted by existing legislation.” The invitation further pointed out that refugee assistance programs would be financed by private agencies and emphasized that no government funds would be required. In addition, Great Britain was assured that the subject of Jewish immigration into Palestine would not be discussed. President Roosevelt did not send his secretary of state to the conference; instead, he dispatched Myron C. Taylor, a businessman and his personal friend, to represent the United States.

Two days after Roosevelt announced the Evian Conference, Adolf Hitler remarked, “I can only hope that the other world, which has such deep sympathy for these criminals

[the Jews], will at least be generous enough to convert this sympathy into practical aid. We on our part are ready to put all these criminals at the disposal of these countries—for all I care, even on luxury ships.”

The delegations from the invited nations did not convert sympathy into practical aid. Representatives from country after country stood up and acknowledged the refugees’ plight but offered excuses and justifications for refusing to open their doors. Great Britain would admit few Jews and kept Palestine closed to large-scale Jewish immigration. Canada was willing to accept farmers, but this opportunity did not help the urban-dwelling Jews of Austria and Germany. Australia declined to assist because, in the words of its representative, it “does not have a racial problem, and [is] not desirous of importing one.” For its part, the United States continued to refuse to increase the number of immigrants it would allow or to reduce the overwhelming bureaucratic hurdles involved in obtaining a visa. Only the Dominican Republic offered substantial aid by agreeing to allow 100,000 Jews to enter its tiny country.

The consequences of the Evian Conference were dire for the Jews of Germany. They were no better off in practical terms than they had been before the conference, yet their oppressors seemed vindicated by the reluctance of Europe and the Americas to help them. Adolf Hitler, himself, addressed the matter at the Party Congress in Nuremberg on September 12, 1938: “They complain ... of the boundless cruelty with which Germany—and now Italy also—seek to rid themselves of their Jewish elements.... But lamentations have not led these democratic countries to substitute helpful activity.... [O]n the contrary, these countries with icy coldness assured us that obviously there was no place for the Jews in their territory....” Although Hitler’s government would not implement the murder of the European Jewish population for three more years, the events of Evian provided Nazi leaders with a useful propaganda tool to explain why emigration would not work and to justify more extreme measures of “removing” the Jews from German “living spaces.”

On November 7, 1938, a Polish Jewish student living in Paris was angered at Germany’s treatment of his parents, Polish Jews who had been living and working in Germany but who had been expelled recently. He assassinated a German diplomat at the embassy in Paris. The Nazi leadership seized the opportunity to portray the act as an organized effort by their enemies to destroy Germany. Just as they had blamed the Communists for the Reichstag fire in 1933 and used the event to step up violence against their political enemies, the Nazis accused “world Jewry” of orchestrating the assassination. In reprisal, they unleashed a massive pogrom throughout the Reich, which by then included Austria and the Sudeten German regions of Czechoslovakia. Although the Nazis presented the events that followed as a spontaneous outburst of public rage, the pogrom was, in fact,

instigated and carried out by Nazi party officials, storm troopers, SS men, and Hitler Youth. Its purpose was to prepare the German people to accept and endorse a new wave of legislation aimed at eliminating the Jews entirely from the economic life of Germany and forcing their expulsion from Germany.

The violence began on November 9 and lasted through November 10, 1938, with sporadic acts of violence over the following days. The Nazis destroyed more than 250 synagogues, including many of the finest Jewish houses of worship in all of Europe, and they damaged beyond repair thousands of precious ritual objects. They attacked anything that was associated with Jews, thereby desecrating cemeteries; vandalizing businesses and homes; looting property; and, in many cases, assaulting and even killing individuals. At least 91 Jews were killed during the pogrom. Some ordinary citizens joined in the destruction of property and physical assault on people, while others looked on, appalled by the violence and disorder.

On orders from Gestapo headquarters, the German police rounded up about 30,000 Jewish men and incarcerated most of them in concentration camps. There the SS guards treated them brutally; hundreds died within days or weeks of their arrival. The pogrom is known as “The Night of Broken Glass” (*Kristallnacht*) to describe the wanton destruction of glass windows that littered the streets of German cities after the authorities finally put an end to the violence.

To add insult to injury, the Nazis blamed Jews for provoking the attack and held them financially responsible for the cleanup. The Nazis imposed on the victims a penalty of one billion reichsmarks (the equivalent of US\$400 million at 1938 rates) and made Jews liable for the repair of their damaged homes, shops, and synagogues. As a further burden, the government appropriated the insurance payments owed to Jewish clients. Store and homeowners were made to repair their buildings and replace their property at their own expense.

“The Night of Broken Glass” marked a turning point and prepared the political and psychological atmosphere for yet another wave of anti-Jewish legislation. In the weeks that followed, the government issued dozens of laws and decrees that deprived Jews of their property and prevented them from earning a livelihood. The regulations also excluded Jews from all aspects of public social life: the German authorities barred them from all public schools and universities, as well as cinemas, theaters, and sports facilities. In many cities, Jews were forbidden to enter designated “Aryan” zones, to enter public parks, and to sit on certain benches. By the end of 1938, the driver’s licenses of Jews had been revoked, and all their financial assets were frozen.

Meanwhile, Nazi aims regarding Jewish emigration escalated from encouragement to outright force. Of the tens of thousands of Jewish men who had been arrested and sent



to concentration camps, most were released only after they proved that they had made arrangements to emigrate from Germany and to transfer their property and assets to non-Jews. Under unprecedented pressure by their own government, tens of thousands of Jews lined up at foreign consulates seeking visas and immigration papers.

The Jewish synagogue in Baden-Baden, Germany (left), continues to burn the morning after “The Night of Broken Glass,” November 9–10, 1938. Synagogues occupy a central place in Jewish religious and communal life. To the Nazis, however, they served as a powerful physical reminder of the presence of Jews in Germany. The Nazis destroyed 250 synagogues in German-occupied territory during “The Night of Broken Glass.” BADEN-BADEN, GERMANY, NOVEMBER 10, 1938. USHMM, COURTESY OF STADTMUSEUM BADEN-BADEN

Still, the international community failed to sufficiently loosen requirements, increase quotas, and streamline bureaucratic processes. In 1939, the United States finally—and for the first time—filled its combined German-Austrian quota (which, after March 1939 included the incorporated Czech provinces of Bohemia and Moravia). However, that limit did not come close to meeting the demand. By the end of June 1939, 309,000 German, Austrian, and Czech Jews had applied for only 27,000 places available under the U.S. quota. Ultimately, only 43,450 Jews from Germany, Austria, and the Czech lands immigrated to the United States in 1939. Other efforts by Americans to help the beleaguered Jews of Germany failed. In particular, the Wagner-Rogers Bill, an effort to admit 20,000 endangered Jewish refugee children on an emergency basis, failed to pass the U.S. Senate in 1939 and again in 1940.

The administrative obstacles to emigration were the most concrete, but not always the most pressing, reason that people failed to exit Germany in time. German Jews thought of themselves as Germans, and many simply could not accept that the rights and privileges that had been theirs since emancipation had been so completely swept away. Until “The

Night of Broken Glass,” German Jews had been tempted to believe that Nazism was a temporary reactionary swing and that the most reasonable and prudent stance was to be patient, to endure, and to wait for it to blow over. In addition, many German Jews—especially those who were established, middle or upper class, and culturally assimilated—had much to lose. The thought of fleeing their homes, leaving behind family, friends, jobs and professions, community, and all other familiar elements of daily life was emotionally agonizing. Germany had been their home for generations, and their attachment to the country of their birth kept them from understanding and accepting the precariousness of their position. Indeed, to leave was to accept that they were no longer German citizens but Jewish refugees. For many, the full understanding and recognition of the danger they faced did not become clear until it was too late.

Despite the difficulties faced in trying to emigrate, by 1939, about half the German Jewish population and more than two-thirds of Austrian Jews had fled Nazi persecution. The ones who were able to emigrate settled mainly in Palestine, the United States, and Central and South America. Under a program known as the Children’s Transport (*Kindertransport*), 10,000 unaccompanied Jewish children were admitted to Great Britain during 1938–39. More than 18,000 Jews from the German Reich were also able to find refuge in Shanghai, in Japanese-occupied China. Still others made their way into other European nations where they would be caught again in the Nazi net during the war.

WORLD WAR II

Nazi leaders planned World War II to accelerate the accomplishment of their long-term goals. First and foremost, they wanted to conquer “living space” (*Lebensraum*), so that the “Aryan” German race would have room to expand and thereby survive. Simultaneously, the conflict would provide a cover and a justification to physically eliminate “racial” enemies, especially the Jews, which the Nazis viewed as their highest priority. The Nazis drew on the domestic consensus, or at least acquiescence, that they had carefully built among the Germans to implement their territorial conquests.

As stated earlier, German forces invaded Poland on September 1, 1939. Two days later, Britain and France declared war on Germany; they had issued a guarantee of Poland’s borders five months earlier in an attempt to force Germany to negotiate for territorial acquisition and to prevent military action. When their approach failed, the nations of Europe found themselves at war.

Using the heightened sense of national emergency that accompanied the outbreak of hostilities, the Nazi government imposed new decrees that discriminated against the Jews who remained in Germany. Authorities subjected the Jewish population to a strict

curfew, excluded them from certain areas of cities, and limited the time periods in which they could purchase provisions and supplies. When food rationing began, the German authorities allotted reduced amounts for Jews and forbade them from buying certain items. German authorities also ordered Jews to turn in their radios, electrical appliances, bicycles, and cars to the police.

Additionally, the defeat and occupation of Poland by the German army in less than a month brought nearly two million Polish Jews under German authority. This development, as well as the refusal of Britain and France to accept Hitler's offer to negotiate peace, further complicated efforts to expel the Jews from areas in which Germans lived. Enemies of Germany closed their borders to immigration from Germany, virtually denying would-be emigrants a path to safety or a country willing to take them. The Nazi leadership had to deal with a vastly increased Jewish population and few ways to force them out of territory under German control.

Faced with such obstacles, the Nazis considered the idea of establishing a so-called Jewish reservation. It was a concept that had been put forth as a solution to the "Jewish question" in the nineteenth century and that regained currency among high-ranking Nazis in the late 1930s. Before the war, planners had speculated that such a place would be established by international action. In the face of the war, Nazi planners clearly saw that they would have to act unilaterally, locating the reservation on territory under German occupation.

When, in May 1940, the Germans invaded and swiftly conquered the western European countries of France, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg, the Nazi leadership saw other possibilities open up for mass expulsion of the Jews to a given location. In particular, the German victory over France led some policy planners to turn their attention to the large French island colony of Madagascar off the east coast of Africa. They focused on the idea of establishing a Jewish reservation there, because it was far from lands on which Germans might settle. The concept of the Madagascar plan depended on a German victory over or accommodation with the British, the continued neutrality of the United States, and devotion of considerable naval and security resources to the removal of Jews. The uncertainty of peace with or victory over the British became clear within weeks of the armistice with France, and by September 1940, continued British domination of the seas was clear.

As Hitler's attention turned eastward toward the Soviet Union and a war that the Nazis had always planned to fight, interest in Madagascar began to wane. At the same time, Hitler's preparation for invading the Soviet Union brought core Nazi goals into sharp focus. A "final solution" to the "Jewish question" in Europe made sense only in the



context of the do-or-die struggle between German Nazism and Soviet communism. The Nazi leadership knew that the invasion of the Soviet Union would bring still more Jews under German control and that the principle of preemptive action to subdue the “Jewish-Bolshevik” enemy created an ideological and psychological atmosphere favoring even more-radical solutions.

The youngest of seven children, **MOISHE FELMAN** (left) was raised in a Yiddish-speaking, religious Jewish home in Sokolow Podlaski, in central Poland. Moishe’s parents ran a grain business. Moishe attended a Jewish school and began public school in Sokolow Podlaski in 1933.

Summer vacation had just finished, and 13-year-old Moishe was about to begin another year at elementary school when the Germans invaded Poland on September 1, 1939. German aircraft bombed Sokolow Podlaski’s market and other civilian targets before German troops entered the town on September 20. Three days later, they set fire to the main synagogue. Later, the Germans confiscated the family’s grain business.

Over the next two years, the Germans imposed restrictions on the Jews, eventually ordering them to wear an identifying Star of David on their clothing. On September 28, 1941, the Germans set up a ghetto and concentrated all of the town’s Jews there. About a year later, on the most solemn holiday of the Jewish religion, the Day of Atonement, the Germans began to round up the people in the ghetto. Those who resisted or tried to hide were shot. Moishe, his mother, and sister were herded onto the boxcar of a train.

On September 22, 1942, Moishe and his family were deported to the Treblinka extermination camp. He was gassed there shortly after arriving. He was 16 years old. NO DATE OR PLACE GIVEN.

USHMM.

The Nazis saw the conundrum in increasingly stark terms: on the one hand, they endorsed an unshakable imperative to remove the Jews; on the other hand, they had increasingly limited options to fulfill that goal. Although scholars still debate the timing of the decision to physically annihilate the Jews of Europe, the steps the Nazi leadership would take against the Jews in the Soviet Union would shape and focus their thinking on that unprecedented and most radical “solution” to the dilemma of the “Jewish problem.”

While the Nazi leadership deliberated about what to do with Europe’s Jews, those leaders took the intermediate step of concentrating, containing, controlling, and isolating them in manageable pockets throughout Poland. The Nazis used as their model the medieval ghetto, an area of town designated by Church authorities as a place where Jews were

permitted to reside but were kept strictly separate from the Christian population. In the twentieth century, ghettos in German-occupied eastern Europe were typically composed of a small number of streets surrounded by barbed wire, fences, or stone walls in the poorest part of a city or town. In more-rural areas, ghettos were often not enclosed at all and, in some cases, constituted the entire town. From the outset, the ghettos were conceived not as a permanent solution to the “Jewish question” but as a provisional measure to control, isolate, and segregate Jews pending their complete removal from territories under German control.

The ghettos established by the German authorities were located primarily in eastern Europe between 1940 and 1943 and in Hungary in 1944. Seeing no need to expend resources on Jewish inhabitants, German occupation policy ensured virtually unlivable conditions in most ghettos. They were severely overcrowded, little existed in the way of sanitation or other measures to control disease, they generally lacked heat and electricity, and food rations were almost always substandard and drastically limited. The brutal and primitive living conditions heavily increased mortality rates from epidemic disease, mass starvation, and exposure.

Jewish children (right) holding bowls for soup rations in the Warsaw ghetto in Poland, between 1940 and 1943. The deprivations of ghetto life affected children with particular severity, turning many of them into beggars and food smugglers. Weakened by hunger and disease, younger children in the ghetto died more quickly than adults did; infants were the first to perish. A small percentage of Jewish children were rescued by non-Jews, who hid them from the German authorities and their accomplices. WARSAW, POLAND, C.1940. USHMM, COURTESY OF INSTYTUT PAMIĘCI NARODOWEJ

The ghettos were conceived ... as a provisional measure
to control, isolate, and segregate Jews
pending their complete removal
from territories under German control.



Initially created as a short-term measure, ghettos existed for as long as three years in occupied Poland (and later in the Soviet Union). During that time, German enterprises, including those owned by the armed forces, the SS, the civilian occupation authorities, and private individuals, took the opportunity to exploit the residents for inexpensive forced labor. Some Jewish ghetto administrations sought investment in the ghettos, particularly from the army and the private sector, in the hope of improving conditions and even ensuring survival in return for production of usable goods. The German civilian authorities continued to allot food and supply rations that were just enough to keep alive those able to work, while those who were weakened by exhaustion or illness inevitably died. Hard labor came to dominate the lives of ghetto inhabitants, and they quickly came to see a relationship between their ability to produce—individually and collectively—and their ongoing survival.

By 1941, conditions in the ghettos in German-occupied Poland had deteriorated to such an extent that they were places of mass death. The results could hardly have been otherwise, considering the Germans' deliberate neglect of the residents' basic needs. Some historians have argued that, had the Germans left the harsh ghetto regime intact, Polish Jewry might well have been annihilated within ten years. Although those ghettos in which both military and private entrepreneurs had invested significantly had advocates for continued existence among the German civilian administrators, the SS and police—who used ideological and security arguments—and German health officials in the occupation bureaucracy—who feared epidemics that might spread to the non-Jewish population—won the debate.

German *Einsatzgruppen* (Mobile Killing Squad) soldiers guard Jewish women and children (right) before massacring them. In the background, other Jews are forced to undress and their clothing is heaped on the ground. This photo, originally in color, was part of a series taken by a German military photographer. Copies from this collection were later used as evidence in war crimes trials. LUBNY, [UKRAINE] USSR, OCTOBER 16, 1941. WITH PERMISSION OF THE HAMBURGER INSTITUT FÜR SOZIALFORSCHUNG

The Nazis, and many other Germans understood the war

as a life-and-death struggle between two world views—

the “German/Aryan” and the “Jewish/communist”—

in which no compromise was possible.



Moreover, in the first months of 1941, the Nazi leaders were deep in planning for the invasion of the Soviet Union, which would, in turn, bring millions more Jews under their control. Against the backdrop of the failed plans for mass expulsion and plans to initiate the conflict that would destroy the archenemy of National Socialism, the Nazi leaders took a first, practical step toward the “Final Solution”; they planned the murder of the Jewish population throughout the Soviet Union.

Germany invaded the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, violating the existing nonaggression pact between the two countries and initiating a war that would make genocide possible. The Germans presented the invasion as a historic struggle against the Bolshevik ideology, which was supposedly disseminated by Jews, and as an attack on the Soviet Union, which was the seat of world communism. More than other conflicts, the Nazis and many other Germans understood the war as a life-and-death struggle between two world views—the “German/Aryan” and the “Jewish/Communist”—in which no compromise was possible. In this context, German authorities gave their invading forces explicit orders to target for annihilation all potential enemies, particularly Jews, Roma, members of the Soviet state and Communist Party elites, and anyone else who might oppose their permanent rule.

Mobile Killing Squads of German SS and police personnel, who followed the German army as it advanced deep into Soviet territory, were tasked with identifying and murdering those whom they perceived to be racial or political enemies of Germany, as well as developing intelligence nets to flush out those enemies who were not immediately visible. Because Nazi ideology defined Soviet Jews as especially dangerous, the Mobile Killing Squads, together with the auxiliary forces that they recruited from local collaborators and the German Order Police units that reinforced them, first shot primarily Jewish men of arms-bearing age, then buried them in mass graves. By the end of July, however, German forces began to annihilate entire Jewish communities—men, women, and children—without regard for age or sex. Those who were able to flee the massacres were often killed by the local population or turned over to the Germans to be shot. SS and police units also killed Roma and officials of the Soviet state and the Communist Party, as well as thousands of residents of institutions for people with mental and physical disabilities.

The civilian German administrator of the Belorussian town of Slutsk witnessed and reported on a massacre in his locale as follows:

As far as the manner in which this action was carried out, it is with deepest regret that I have to state that this bordered on the sadistic.... The Jewish people but also [non-Jewish] White Russians were taken from their homes and rounded up with indescribable brutality by both the German

police officials and, in particular, the Lithuanian partisans. Gunfire could be heard everywhere in the town and the bodies of the executed Jews piled up in the streets.... I was not present at the shooting which took place outside the town. I cannot, therefore, make any remarks about the brutality. It should however suffice to say that some time after the graves had been filled up victims managed to work their way out of them.

One of the most infamous massacre sites was Babi Yar, a ravine situated just outside Kiev in Ukraine. By the time the Germans captured Kiev on September 19, 1941, more than half the Jews who lived there had managed to flee. Ten days after taking the city, the Germans ordered the remaining Jews to report for supposed resettlement. Jews who ignored the German order faced the death penalty. Whole families, from infants to grandparents, followed the German directive and appeared at the assembly point, having no idea of the fate that awaited them. They were directed to proceed along Melnik Street toward the Jewish cemetery and into an area that included the cemetery itself and a part of the Babi Yar ravine. It was cordoned off by a barbed-wire fence and guarded by Germans and Ukrainian auxiliary police. As the Jews approached the ravine, they were forced to hand over their valuables, take off all their clothes, and advance toward the ravine edge in groups of ten. When they reached the edge, German SS and police gunned them down with automatic weapons. At the end of the day, the bodies were covered over with a thin layer of soil. In two days of shooting, the Germans and their auxiliaries had killed more than 33,000 Jews. In the months that followed, thousands more were killed at Babi Yar, including many Roma and Soviet prisoners of war. The final death toll at Babi Yar has been estimated at 100,000.

Most men of the Mobile Killing Squads were ideologically committed individuals, but they drew support and reinforcement from tens of thousands of German Order Police and military personnel, many of whom had not joined either the Nazi party or the SS. The killing units also depended on assistance from local populations, who were not necessarily adherents of Nazi ideology but whose actions clearly represented a willingness to kill Jews and Communists. Many scholars believe that the systematic slaughter of Jews in the occupied Soviet Union was a critical test of the readiness of ordinary people—both German and non-German—to acquiesce and in some cases to participate in organized mass murder.

THE “FINAL SOLUTION”

The “Final Solution” was the Nazis’ comprehensive program to solve the “Jewish question” by murdering every Jew in Europe. It was the culmination of a process in Nazi anti-Jewish



policy that began with legal discrimination against Jews in Germany, transitioned to coercive emigration and schemes for mass expulsion, and then escalated from the mass murder of the Soviet Jews to the attempted annihilation of the entire Jewish population of Europe.

A family (left) poses for a photograph in the prewar Polish town known in Yiddish as Eishishok and in Polish as Ejszyszki (present-day Eišiškes, Lithuania). The history of this town mirrors that of many Jewish communities in eastern Europe. German troops arrived on June 23, 1941, and less than three months later, on September 21, an SS Mobile Killing Squad entered the town, accompanied by Lithuanian auxiliaries. Four thousand Jews from Eishishok and its environs were herded into three synagogues and imprisoned there. They were taken in groups of 250 to the old Jewish cemetery where SS men ordered them to undress and stand at the edge of open pits. There, Lithuanian auxiliary troops shot them to death. Over only a few days, the massacre ended 900 years of Jewish life and culture in Eishishok. Today, no Jews live there. EISHISHOK (PRESENT-DAY EIŠIŠKES, LITHUANIA), BEFORE 1941. WITH PERMISSION OF THE SHTETL FOUNDATION

The exact timing of the decision to implement the “Final Solution” will probably never be known and remains a subject of debate among scholars. Implementation of the policy surely was accelerated by the unparalleled success of German forces in the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941, when the prospect of victory over the Soviets and indeed all of Europe seemed within reach. After the SS and police had begun to physically annihilate entire Jewish communities in the east, mass murder became not only conceivable but also achievable in practice—a more “final” solution than mass expulsion. But some of the inherent problems in the killing operations in the Soviet Union rendered them difficult, if not impossible, to implement elsewhere in German-occupied Europe. Murder by shooting in open-air pits was slow, inefficient, and psychologically traumatic for some of the shooters; also, it tended in the long term to awaken genuine unrest in the indigenous populations.

The tactics used by the German authorities to kill Jews in Russia could not be exported to Germany and western Europe. Outright killings in plain sight of the local populations not only would present serious opposition to the Nazi regime, but also would allow news of the atrocities to spread throughout the world at large. Mindful of those issues, the SS and police leaders merged elements of their past programs to develop the “Final Solution.” In addition to continuing the police shootings in the Soviet Union and the General Government, the SS and police leaders established stationary killing centers at locations convenient to deportation of the large numbers of Polish Jews. Using the model of the “euthanasia” program gas chambers or the gas vans that had been used in Serbia and Soviet Russia, they chose as a killing method suffocation with carbon monoxide or Zyklon B gas. To ensure security and to facilitate deception, the Nazis located the killing centers in areas of Poland that were distant from the German and west European population centers; they were also at some distance from the major ghettos where the Polish Jews were concentrated. To guarantee both security and secrecy, the Germans would carry out the actual gassing operations inside secured enclosures, surrounded by barbed wire and guarded on the perimeter. Drawing on the experience of earlier population resettlement programs, the Germans would transport the Jews to their deaths using existing European rail routes, augmented by special rail spurs into the killing centers themselves. The German authorities planned to hide the murders behind the deceptive facade of “Resettlement in the East.” In the autumn of 1941, SS and police officials began the construction of special gassing facilities, and on December 8, 1941, the first killing operations began at Chelmno in occupied Poland.

On January 20, 1942, 15 high-ranking Nazi party, SS, and German government officials gathered at a villa in the Berlin suburb of Wannsee to discuss and coordinate the implementation of the “Final Solution.” The participants at the conference did not deliberate whether such a plan should be undertaken but instead discussed the mechanics and logistics needed to realize a decision that had already been made. Most of them were already aware that Jews were being killed, but they received a fuller briefing on the scope of the mass-murder program. Nazi planners envisioned that the “Final Solution” would ultimately involve 11 million European Jews from Ireland to the Urals and from Scandinavia to Spain—in short, every Jew in Europe. More than half of the conference participants held doctoral degrees. No one protested the plan or the decision to implement it.

Likewise, the “Final Solution” could not have taken place without the contributions of countless regular citizens who came from all walks of life and all levels of society. Although few thought of themselves as criminals, most understood the consequences of their actions. Some perpetrators had held official office before Hitler’s rise to power;

others were newcomers seeking to establish themselves. Some were zealots motivated by Nazi racial ideology; a great many others merely followed orders; still others justified their actions as a defense of their nation, society, and culture against Soviet communism; and, finally, some were motivated by personal gain, jealousy, or revenge.

Most Germans performed small roles in what became a vast undertaking. Using assembly-line techniques, individuals did their jobs within a bureaucratic apparatus that allowed them to remain detached from the consequences of their actions. The participants included high-ranking bureaucrats who helped formulate and implement the “Final Solution” and those who identified and located the victims. They included lawyers who handled the “Aryanization” of property owned by Jews, industrialists who profited from the forced labor of concentration camp inmates, and contractors who built the gas chambers and supplied Zyklon B gas to the SS. In a more direct way, the SS men who operated the killing centers in German-occupied Poland helped, as did the ordinary soldiers and police officials who shot Jews at the edge of mass graves in the Soviet Union. The Nazi leadership depended on the active cooperation of regular people in regular professions, and, at the very least, the silent acquiescence of others who did not carry out Nazi orders directly.

By the summer of 1942, more than 400 ghettos of varying sizes had been established throughout German-occupied eastern Europe. They held more than two million Jews and, in the Warsaw and Łódź ghettos, more than 8,000 Roma. The provisional nature of the ghettos evolved into a semi-permanent one as the Nazis translated the “Final Solution” from concept to reality. The largest of the ghettos included those of Warsaw, Łódź, Sosnowiec, and Białystok in Poland; Minsk in Belorussia; Kovno (present-day Kaunas) and Vilna (present-day Vilnius) in Lithuania; and Riga in Latvia. The larger ghettos were sealed off from the outside world with high walls or fences, along with barbed wire. Signed passes were required to enter or leave, and armed guards stood at entrances and exits.

Smaller ghettos, such as those of Radom, Chelm, and Kielce, were usually surrounded only by a fence, and Jews could enter and leave them with relative ease. Some ghettos, such as Izbica, Piaski, and Bełżyce, encompassed virtually whole towns and were not bordered off at all. Some of the “open” ghettos were short-lived: the SS and police annihilated them after a short period of time, either shooting the inhabitants or deporting them to concentration camps or killing centers. With the Nazi decision for mass murder in 1942, the German authorities began the long and involved process of emptying the ghettos in the occupied east and deporting the inhabitants to killing centers.

As a general rule, the Nazis did not use ghettos in Germany or in western Europe. Beginning in September 1941, the Nazis required all Jews who lived in those areas and were over the age of six to wear the yellow Star of David badge; plus, strict residence ordinances

forced the inhabitants into certain areas of the cities, thereby concentrating them in “Jewish buildings.” Deportation of Jews from Germany began on October 15, 1941, even before the Germans began construction of the killing centers in occupied Poland. Between October and December 1941, nearly 42,000 Jews were deported from Germany, Austria, and the Czech lands to ghettos in the east and later to the killing centers.

In November 1941, the SS established the Theresienstadt camp-ghetto near the Czech city of Prague in northwest Bohemia. Although it fulfilled the role of both a ghetto and a transit camp by confining Jews until such time as the Germans chose to deport them farther east, Theresienstadt simultaneously served an important propaganda function for the SS. The German authorities repeatedly stated publicly that the deportation of Jews from Germany was part of a resettlement operation, where they would be employed in “productive” labor. The purpose of this deception was primarily for domestic German consumption, because the Nazi leaders feared that public unrest might arise if the population knew exactly what was being done in the killing centers. Hence, the reality of the ghettos, camps, and killing centers could not be publicly confirmed. But how would it look to deport elderly Jews who were clearly unsuitable for labor, and how could one explain the disappearance of prominent Jewish artists, thinkers, writers, and others? The Nazis saw Theresienstadt as a suitable cover to respond to those Germans who were not entirely satisfied with the official explanations of the fate of all German Jews in the east.

In Nazi propaganda, Theresienstadt was presented as a retirement ghetto where German Jews—primarily the elderly; disabled war veterans; or prominently known artists, writers, or entertainers—could live in safety. Eventually, it was portrayed to the International Red Cross and the world at large as a “city” for the Jews, complete with amenities and comforts for adults and children alike. The German public and the International Red Cross, who were permitted access in June 1944, were all too willing to accept this deception, or at least not to probe further. In fact, Theresienstadt served as a transit camp for nearly 70,000 Czech Jews en route to Auschwitz and other ghettos and camps, as well as a temporary residence for nearly 20,000 German and Austrian Jews whom the Germans eventually deported to killing centers. In all, nearly 141,000 German, Austrian, Czech, Danish, Dutch, Slovak, and Hungarian Jews arrived in Theresienstadt during the war. More than 88,000 of them were deported to their deaths, the majority at Auschwitz. Nor was the reality of Theresienstadt itself much different from other ghettos: about 33,500 of its residents died from the harsh conditions in the ghetto.

For the German authorities, the ghettos continued to serve the provisional purpose of concentrating and isolating the Jewish population; but, in reality, the complexity of implementing the “Final Solution” required maintaining many ghettos for years. The

Jews confined there necessarily developed an intricate and involved communal life over time. While daily survival was necessarily dominated by the realities of work, food, shelter, health, and well-being, the Jews in the ghetto—in part through the efforts of the Jewish Councils—also found ways to educate their children, organize cultural and social events, clandestinely observe their faith, and engage in countless other activities that sustained them amid unrelenting deprivation.

GERMAN POLICIES IN WESTERN EUROPE

Almost immediately following the German invasion and the occupation of western Europe in June 1940, the Germans initiated steps that would later facilitate implementing the “Final Solution” there. With varying degrees of help from indigenous governments and officials, they applied the experience gained in Germany to the occupied countries or dependent partners, often initiating an overwhelming barrage of antisemitic laws in rapid succession. For those who were defined as Jews, the Germans, or collaborators, then restricted or eliminated their civil rights, confiscated their property and businesses, and banned them from most professions. Isolated from non-Jews and, in most countries, marked with the yellow Star of David, Jews were without recourse.

The next step for the Nazis was to establish internment or transit camps that would serve as portals from the western European countries to the railways leading to the east. Beginning in 1942, German authorities and their collaborators gathered tens of thousands of Jews in special police transit camps such as Drancy in France, Malines in Belgium, and Westerbork in Holland, where the Jews were confined in limbo for days, weeks, and sometimes months or years. Meanwhile, a steady stream of Jews in transit camps were loaded onto trains and deported to the concentration camps and killing centers in the east.

German anti-Jewish policy in the occupied countries always reflected the goals of the “Final Solution.” However, the ultimate fate of each community varied, depending on the degree of control the Germans exercised; the number of Jews; and the level of cooperation the Germans received from indigenous government or other agencies, administrative officials, and individual civilians. In general, foreign and stateless Jews who had taken refuge in western Europe in the 1930s were especially vulnerable. Host countries did not feel obligated to keep or protect those Jews, and indeed, they often viewed them as an unnecessary burden in very trying times. When the Germans demanded Jews for deportation, foreign or stateless Jews were the first to be surrendered.

About 350,000 Jews lived in France at the time of the German invasion. Beginning in March 1942, the French police assisted in carrying out the deportations, both in the German-occupied zone of northern France and in the unoccupied south. By the end of

the war, the Germans had deported and killed nearly 75,000 Jews who had resided in France. Meanwhile, in Belgium, the Jewish community numbered about 66,000. From the summer of 1942 to mid 1944, 25,000 Jews—more than one-third—were deported to Auschwitz by way of Belgian transit camps. In the Netherlands, the Dutch civil administration, supervised by the Germans, deported about 107,000 of 140,000 Jews residing in Holland to the killing centers through the transit camps at Westerbork and Amersfoort. Barely more than 5,000 survived.

The transportation of hundreds of thousands of individuals from their homes across the continent of Europe could not have taken place without trains. In that regard, the European rail system played a crucial role in the implementation of the “Final Solution,” thereby linking the collection centers, internment and transit camps, and ghettos to labor and concentrations camps and to killing centers where the Jews and others were put to death. The Germans used both freight and passenger cars for the deportations and doubled the number of passengers who could fit in each car to maximize the efficiency of each trip.

Reflecting the high priority of their mission, the transports rolled as often as possible. The Germans did not tell the Jews where they were going, how long the journey would last, or what would happen once they reached their final destination. They also did not provide the deportees with food or water, even when the transports had to wait days on railroad spurs for other trains to pass. The people sealed in freight cars suffered from intense heat in summer and freezing temperatures in winter. Aside from a bucket, no provisions existed for sanitary requirements. Deprived of food and water, many deportees died before the trains reached their destinations. Armed guards accompanying the train transports shot anyone trying to escape.

German transportation officials and local railroad workers could see that large numbers of people arrived at isolated railroad stations in German-occupied Poland and disappeared into makeshift facilities. Local officials, in particular, also saw that the returning trains were either empty or filled with the possessions of those who had just arrived. Most suspected and many knew full well that the SS was killing the Jews who arrived on transport trains at those locations, but no record exists of any railroad employees protesting or resigning. Between the fall of 1941 and the fall of 1944, the German authorities transported millions of people by train to murder sites in occupied Poland and the occupied Soviet Union. After the war, despite the complicity of hundreds of railroad workers, not one German transportation official was convicted of Nazi crimes.

The killing centers fulfilled the singular function of mass murder: the SS and police designed, organized, and operated them to have the capacity so that by the end of the day they could put to death entire transports which had arrived that morning. With the

exception of those few selected for work in support of the assembly-line mass murder, no one—not the young, the healthy, or the fit for work—was spared. The first killing center was Chełmno, which began operations in December 1941 on an estate some 30 miles (48.3 kilometers) northwest of Łódź, in German-occupied Poland. On arrival, the SS and police induced or forced the Jews to undress and relinquish their valuables and then herded them into closed paneled trucks. Engineers and mechanics hermetically sealed the trucks and reconfigured the exhaust pipes to pump carbon monoxide exhaust fumes into the back of the truck until those inside were dead. Between December 1941 and July 1944, the SS and police killed 156,000 people at Chełmno, most of them Jews, but about 5,000 were Roma. No victims are known to have escaped.

In 1942 in the General Government, SS and police engineers constructed the killing centers of Bełżec, Sobibór, and Treblinka. The centers functioned in support of Operation Reinhard, one element of which encompassed the murder of all Jews residing in the General Government. Just as Nazi planners had envisioned, the SS and police staffs at those centers could commit mass murder quickly, efficiently, and with minimal oversight; they killed all but a handful of deportees shortly after arrival by means of carbon monoxide gas in stationary gas chambers modeled on the T-4 killing operations.

The camp authorities temporarily spared a small number of “work Jews” to facilitate the process, assisting the deportees off the trains and through the various stages to the gas chambers, all the while being required to calm the victims with reassurances about the future. Others in the labor details removed the corpses and buried them. After the autumn of 1942, when the SS authorities decided to burn the corpses, the forced labor details were required to exhume them and burn them over large outdoor ovens made of rail track. Finally, the killing center authorities deployed Jews to sort through the victims’ personal possessions and to prepare them for shipment to Germany. Every few weeks or months, the SS would kill the “work Jews,” replacing them with new arrivals. SS and police personnel murdered approximately 1.7 million Jews as part of Operation Reinhard. Very few deportees survived the camps: some 300 survived Sobibór and about 120 survived Treblinka, virtually all as a result of uprisings that occurred in 1943. Only two individuals are known to have survived Bełżec.

The Auschwitz concentration camp, located about 40 miles (64.4 kilometers) west of Kraków in southwestern Poland, was the largest camp complex established by the Germans during World War II. It included a concentration camp–detention facility (Auschwitz I), a killing center (Auschwitz II or Birkenau), and a second concentration camp that served as a hub for a vast string of forced labor camps (Auschwitz III or Monowitz). By spring 1943, Auschwitz-Birkenau had four gas chambers in operation.



Unlike the Operation Reinhard camps, but like other concentration camps that had gas chambers, the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp staff used Zyklon B gas for mass murder. Trains brought Jews almost daily to Auschwitz-Birkenau from Germany itself and virtually every German-occupied country. Prisoners arriving at the camp were sentenced to one of two fates: immediate death or brutal labor under conditions that were frequently lethal. On the basis of selections often casually made when a transport arrived, the SS staff sent the sick, the elderly, pregnant women, and children directly to the gas chambers; healthy-looking male and female prisoners were brought into the camp as forced laborers.

Jewish women, children, and the elderly (left) await deportation at the railroad station in Kőszeg, a small town in northwestern Hungary. KŐSZEG, HUNGARY, MAY 1944. USHMM, COURTESY OF MAGYAR NEMZETI MUZEUM TÖRTENETI FENYKEPTAR

Registered in more or less the same fashion as the inmates of other concentration camps, Auschwitz prisoners had their heads shaved and were issued ragged, striped camp uniforms. They also—unlike other camp inmates—had a number tattooed on the left forearm, a practice initiated at Auschwitz because the camp authorities could not maintain pace in record keeping with the number of deaths and wanted to be certain that the dead could be identified even if the bodies were quickly stripped of their prisoner uniforms. Indeed, tens of thousands perished because of the unbearable living and working conditions. They were packed into bunks in barracks that barely provided shelter, they received little to eat, and they were punished by long hours of physically exhausting labor.

The SS sent almost all children and adolescents under the age of 15 who arrived at Auschwitz immediately to the gas chambers. During the deportation of the Hungarian Jews in 1944, the camp staff on occasion killed as many as 10,000 Jews in a single day. The bodies were incinerated in crematoria adjacent to the gas chambers; in the case of a malfunction, the bodies were burned in open fields. Between the establishment of Auschwitz I in 1940 and the evacuation of the complex in January 1945, the SS at Auschwitz killed about one million Jews and tens of thousands of Roma, Poles, and Soviet prisoners of war.

Lublin concentration camp, which was also known as Majdanek, in German-occupied Poland, was also a site of mass killing. It had served first as a detention center for prisoners of war and was redesignated a concentration camp in February 1943. In all, nearly 100,000 people died in Majdanek. The majority were Jews; other victims included Polish and Soviet civilians, plus Soviet prisoners of war. On November 3, 1943, SS and police units shot 18,000 Jewish prisoners in pits dug behind Majdanek as part of the grotesquely named Operation Harvest Festival. As the victims were led outside the barbed-wire fence of the camp, the Germans broadcast military music to hide the sounds of the shooting. This massacre was the largest single-day shooting operation in the history of the Holocaust.

Gradually, the Jews began to understand the nature and scope of the German killing policy. In response, and despite the overwhelming nature of the assault they faced, Jews organized and carried out armed resistance against their oppressors. They faced tremendous obstacles, including a lack of armaments and training, the hazards of carrying out operations in a hostile zone, the minimal support and even antisemitic hostility from the surrounding population, the necessity of parting with family, and the ever-present Nazi terror. Nevertheless, both as individuals and in organized groups, Jews engaged in opposition efforts in France, Belgium, Belorussia, Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine. They also fought in national French, Greek, Italian, Soviet, and Yugoslav resistance organizations.

Resistance organizations emerged in more than 100 ghettos in Poland, Lithuania, Belorussia, and Ukraine; and Jews fought back when the Germans attempted to establish ghettos in a number of small towns, including Starodub (now Russia), Kleck (Kletsak), Lachwa, Mir, and Tuczyn (Tuchyn, now Ukraine) in eastern Poland in 1942. As the Germans destroyed major ghettos in 1943, they met with armed Jewish resistance in Kraków, Białystok, Częstochowa, Będzin, Sosnowiec, and Tarnów, as well as a major uprising in Warsaw. Thousands of Jews escaped from the ghettos and joined partisan units in nearby forests. Jews from Minsk, Vilna (present-day Vilnius), Riga, and Kovno (present-day Kaunas) all formed partisan units that engaged in armed resistance. Many ghetto fighters knew that

their efforts could not save Jewish masses from destruction, but they fought for the sake of Jewish honor and to avenge the murder of their families, friends, and communities.

The largest and best-known armed resistance effort was the Warsaw ghetto uprising in April–May 1943, which was sparked by rumors that the Nazis would deport the remaining ghetto inhabitants to the Treblinka killing center in German-occupied Poland. As German forces entered the ghetto, members of the Jewish Fighting Organization (*Żydowska Organizacja Bojowa*) pelted German tanks with hand grenades and Molotov cocktails. Hundreds of Jews fought the Germans and their auxiliaries in the streets of the ghetto. Thousands of Jews refused to obey German orders to report to an assembly point for deportation. In the end, the Germans burned the ghetto to the ground to force the Jews out. It took 27 days to destroy the ghetto and crush the last resisters. Although they knew defeat was certain, Jews in the ghetto fought desperately and valiantly.

In western Belorussia, western Ukraine, and eastern Poland, Jewish civilians gathered in camps and assisted Soviet partisan efforts by repairing weapons, making clothing, cooking for the fighters, and participating in active assaults on the Germans. As many as 10,000 Jews survived the war by taking refuge with those partisan units.

Despite the most adverse conditions, Jewish prisoners succeeded in initiating resistance and uprisings in the German camps, as well, and even in the killing centers of Treblinka, Sobibór, and Auschwitz-Birkenau during 1943–44. About 1,000 Jewish prisoners participated in the revolt in Treblinka. On August 2, 1943, Jews seized what weapons they could find—picks, axes, and some firearms stolen from the camp armory—and they set fire to the camp. About 200 managed to escape. The Germans recaptured and killed about half of the escapees. On October 14, 1943, prisoners in Sobibór killed 11 SS guards and police auxiliaries and set the camp on fire. About 300 prisoners escaped, breaking through the barbed wire and risking their lives in the minefield surrounding the camp. More than 100 were recaptured and later shot. On October 7, 1944, prisoners assigned to Crematorium IV at Auschwitz-Birkenau rebelled after learning that they were going to be killed. The Germans crushed the revolt and murdered almost all of the several hundred prisoners involved in the rebellion. Other camp uprisings took place in the Kruszyna (1942), Minsk-Mazowiecki (1943), and Janowska (1943) camps. In several dozen camps, prisoners organized escapes to join partisan units.

In France, the Jewish Army (*Armée Juive*), a French Jewish partisan group, was founded in Toulouse in January 1942. Composed of members of Zionist youth movements, the Jewish Army operated in and around Toulouse, as well as Lyon, Nice, and Paris. Its members smuggled money from Switzerland into France to assist Jews in hiding; smuggled at least 500 Jews and non-Jews into neutral Spain; and took part in the 1944 uprisings against the Germans in Lyon, Paris, and Toulouse.

The Union of Jews for Resistance and Mutual Aid (more commonly known as *Solidarité*) was a Jewish Communist organization that carried out attacks on German personnel in Paris. Many Jews joined the general French resistance as well. In Belgium, a combined Jewish and non-Jewish resistance unit (also named *Solidarité*) derailed a deportation train in April 1943. On July 25, 1942, Jewish resisters attacked and burned the files of the Association of Jews in Belgium, which had functioned—at German direction—as a Jewish Council. Jews were also active in the Dutch and Italian underground movements.

The effect of armed Jewish resistance should not be exaggerated. In part because of existing antisemitism among the surrounding populations, Jewish partisans received little help. Their isolation was reinforced by the fact that the Allies failed to provide arms and explosives, and their effectiveness was severely hindered by the all-encompassing strength and power of the enemy. In the end, Jewish resistance efforts did little to stop the Germans from mass-murdering the Jews.

In addition to participating in armed operations, Jews resisted the Nazis by focusing on aid to those in hiding, rescue, escape, and spiritual defiance. Jews in the ghettos and camps also responded to Nazi oppression by creating and sustaining cultural institutions, continuing religious observance, and undertaking efforts to document their experiences under Nazi oppression. Individuals and groups attempted to preserve their history, culture, communal life, and evidence of their destruction through diaries, testimonies, communal records, poetry, song, and art. Their efforts can be seen as a counterpart to armed resistance: not by killing the enemy, but by attempting to preserve the dignity of the victims and to leave behind a record of their existence in the world.

As the tide of the war shifted and it became clear that the Allies were gaining ground, the SS was faced with the problem of concealing the evidence of mass killing. It was a daunting prospect because the camps had to be dismantled and untold numbers of dead had to be exhumed and cremated. The SS tried to conceal their traces both by burning bodies and by destroying documentation that testified to their crimes.

The Operation Reinhard killing centers were dismantled in 1943: Belżec, which had ceased operations in December 1942, was dismantled in the spring; Treblinka, where the prisoner revolt in August 1943 effectively halted operations, was closed in the autumn; and Sobibór, where operations as a killing center ended with the prisoner revolt, was closed at the end of the year. After their work was finished, the SS and police murdered the prisoners who had been forced to dismantle the camps. The sites where Belżec and Treblinka had been located were plowed over, relandscaped, and camouflaged as small farms. After the gassing facilities had been removed at Sobibór, the camp served for a time as an ammunition depot for the *Waffen* SS. The SS continued to murder those arriving at

Auschwitz-Birkenau until November 1944, when, at Himmler's order, the SS destroyed the killing apparatus as Soviet forces approached the area.

After the catastrophic German defeats at Stalingrad in January 1943 and in Kursk in July 1943 on the eastern front, Security Police and Security Service officials in the occupied Soviet Union also took steps to conceal the traces of the shooting operations carried out in 1941–42. Throughout the occupied Soviet Union, SS and police forces identified mass graves and then deployed forced labor detachments of Jews to exhume the partially decomposed bodies and burn them on open-air pyres built on rail tracks. After the job was complete, the SS and police killed the Jews whom they had forced to carry out the gruesome tasks.

In January 1945, Nazi Germany faced total military defeat. As Allied and Soviet forces approached the camps, the SS organized the remaining prisoners into columns and marched them away from the advancing armies. Those evacuations came to be called “death marches” as prisoners—Jewish and non-Jewish—were made to traverse hundreds of miles in bitter cold, with little or no food, water, or rest. Any prisoner unable to keep up with the others was shot. The largest death marches took place in the winter of 1944–45 as the Soviet army liberated Poland.

The SS camp guards reacted in different ways to total defeat. Some took off their uniforms and tried to disappear among the millions of German army POWs. Others, remaining faithful to Nazi ideology, viewed the Allied victory as the handiwork of the Jews and thus attempted to fulfill their mission by killing as many Jews as possible in the final moments of the war. Still others carried out massacres to prevent Jewish survivors from falling into the hands of the liberators and publicly testifying to the Nazi atrocities.

As Germany fell into complete collapse, the converging armies of the Allies and the Soviets arrived in the concentration camps. The typical brutality and lethal nature of camp life was exacerbated in those last months by the total breakdown of supplies, often limiting or eliminating what little food the prisoners were getting. Liberators confronted piles of unburied corpses and barracks filled with dead and dying prisoners. The stench of death was everywhere. Even though the structures of assembly-line mass murder had been destroyed, liberation exposed the full scope of Nazi horrors to the world. Despite Nazi efforts to hide their traces, thousands of starved and diseased prisoners had been left behind to testify—both in words and by their physical condition—about their experiences in the camps.

Even after liberation, thousands of prisoners continued to die at a high rate. The lack of sanitary conditions in the camps intensified the problem, contributing to outbreaks of epidemics. Within a few days, half the prisoners found alive when the Soviets arrived

at Auschwitz had died. In Bergen-Belsen, hundreds of prisoners died every day for three weeks. During the first month after liberation, 13,000 of the camp's approximately 50,000 surviving prisoners died. Even at the sites of the killing centers, which the SS and police had dismantled, forensic evidence, such as buried ash and bone fragments, bore witness to the crimes committed there.

World War II ended in Europe with the unconditional surrender of the German armed forces to the Western Allies on May 7, 1945, and to the Soviets on May 9, 1945. May 8, 1945, was proclaimed Victory in Europe Day (V-E Day). One week earlier, as Soviet forces neared his command bunker in central Berlin on April 30, 1945, Adolf Hitler committed suicide. It is no exaggeration to say that Europe lay in ruins. War and genocide, displacement and upheaval left the continent in a state of chaos. Although trials of the perpetrators began within months of the German surrender, western European Jewish communities would take decades to partially restore themselves. The Jewish communities of central and eastern Europe disappeared, culturally and physically, except for remnants in Hungary and Romania and small groups of survivors elsewhere in the region. Indeed, what was destroyed during the 12 years of Nazi rule—human life, culture, history, community, and collective memory—could be never be rebuilt or repaired.

Shortly following the liberation in April 1945, emaciated survivors (right) rest in a group at the Buchenwald concentration camp in Germany. BUCHENWALD, GERMANY, C. APRIL 11, 1945. USHMM, COURTESY OF HADASSAH BIMKO ROSENSAFT

According to Nazi ideology, the Jews of Europe represented the priority “racial” enemy who by their very existence threatened the survival of the “Aryan” German race. Drawing

Despite Nazi efforts to hide their traces
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on a thousand years of stereotypes about Jews and “Jewish” behavior, as well as recent malicious stereotyping linking Jews to Bolshevik radicalism, the Nazis enlisted a nation of more than 60 million and hundreds of thousands of collaborators from annexed, occupied, and allied countries in a program to physically annihilate the Jewish population of Europe. In terms of numbers alone, they almost succeeded; the Germans and their Axis partners killed up to six million European Jews living in the territory that they had seized.

Perhaps 1.5 million Jews survived this unprecedented, murderous onslaught, the vast majority of whom either lived on the land controlled by Germany’s Axis partners or managed to flee German-occupied Europe. Many of those who survived the camps, killing centers, and shooting operations would have to recover from having witnessed the physical elimination of their families and communities. Moreover, by virtually eliminating the Jewish minority in central and eastern Europe, the Nazi program of mass murder tore asunder forever an integral part of Central and East European society and culture, in both the cities and the countryside. Although individual, national cultures could revive, even after 40 years of Communist rule, they lack—to this day—that unique flavor, diversity, and complexity that their Jewish communities contributed over the course of a millennium to their development. As for the survivors of the Nazi assault, they brought their creativity, talents, hopes, and hard work to the lands and peoples that offered them refuge and a chance to start anew during and after the era of the Holocaust.

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