

Frequently Asked Questions

Visitors often ask the following questions. The brief answers offered here are only meant as an introduction to the complex history of the Holocaust. Scholars have spent years writing and researching about these questions.

1. What was the Holocaust?

The Holocaust was the systematic, bureaucratic annihilation of six million Jews by the Nazi regime and their collaborators as a central act of state during World War II. In 1933 approximately nine million Jews lived in the 21 countries of Europe that would be occupied by Germany during the war. By 1945 two out of every three European Jews had been killed. Although Jews were the primary victims, hundreds of thousands of Roma (Gypsies) and at least 250,000 mentally or physically disabled persons were also victims of Nazi genocide. As Nazi tyranny spread across Europe from 1933 to 1945, millions of other innocent people were persecuted and murdered. More than three million Soviet prisoners of war were killed because of their nationality. Poles, as well as other Slavs, were targeted for slave labor, and as a result tens of thousands perished. Homosexuals and others deemed "anti-social" were also persecuted and often murdered. In addition, thousands of political and religious dissidents such as communists, socialists, trade unionists, and Jehovah's Witnesses were persecuted for their beliefs and behavior and many of these individuals died as a result of maltreatment.

2. Who were the Nazis?

"Nazi" is a short term for the National Socialist German Workers Party, a right-wing political party formed in 1919 primarily by unemployed German veterans of World War I. Adolf Hitler became head of the party in 1921, and under his leadership the party eventually became a powerful political force in German elections by the early 1930's. The Nazi party ideology was strongly anti-Communist, antisemitic, racist, nationalistic, imperialistic, and militaristic.

In 1933, the Nazi Party assumed power in Germany and Adolf Hitler was appointed Chancellor. He ended German democracy and severely restricted basic rights, such as freedom of speech, press, and assembly. He established a brutal dictatorship through a reign of terror. This created an atmosphere of fear, distrust, and suspicion in which people betrayed their neighbors and which helped the Nazis to obtain the acquiescence of social institutions such as the civil service, the educational system, churches, the judiciary, industry, business, and other professions.

3. Why did the Nazis want to kill large numbers of innocent people?

The Nazis believed that Germans were "racially superior" and that there was a struggle for survival between them and "inferior races." Jews, Roma (Gypsies), and the handicapped were seen as a serious biological threat to the purity of the "German (Aryan) Race" and therefore had to be "exterminated." The Nazis blamed the Jews for Germany's defeat in World War I, for its economic problems and for the spread of Communist parties throughout Europe. Slavic peoples (Poles, Russians, and others) were also considered "inferior" and destined to serve as slave labor for their German masters. Communists, Socialists, Jehovah's Witnesses, homosexuals, and Free Masons were persecuted, imprisoned, and often killed on political and behavioral (rather than racial) grounds. Sometimes the distinction was not very clear. Millions of Soviet Prisoners of War perished from starvation, disease and forced labor or were killed for racial or political reasons.

4. How did the Nazis carry out their policy of genocide?

In the late 1930's the Nazis killed thousands of handicapped Germans by lethal injection and poisonous gas. After the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, mobile killing units following in the wake of the German Army began shooting massive numbers of Jews and Roma (Gypsies) in open fields and ravines on the outskirts of conquered cities and towns. Eventually the Nazis created a more secluded and organized method of killing enormous numbers of civilians -- six extermination centers were established in occupied Poland where large-scale murder by gas and body disposal through cremation were conducted systematically. Victims were deported to these centers from Western Europe and from the ghettos in Eastern Europe which the Nazis had established. In addition, millions died in the ghettos and concentration camps as a result of forced labor, starvation, exposure, brutality, disease, and execution.

5. How did the world respond to the Holocaust?

The United States and Great Britain as well as other nations outside Nazi Europe received numerous press reports in the 1930s about the persecution of Jews. By 1942 the governments of the United States and Great Britain had confirmed reports about "the Final Solution" -- Germany's intent to kill all the Jews of Europe. However, influenced by antisemitism and fear of a massive influx of refugees, neither country modified their refugee policies. Their stated intention to defeat Germany militarily took precedence over rescue efforts, and therefore no specific attempts to stop or slow the genocide were made until mounting pressure eventually forced the United States to undertake limited rescue efforts in 1944.

In Europe, rampant antisemitism incited citizens of many German-occupied countries to collaborate with the Nazis in their genocidal policies. There were, however, individuals and groups in every occupied nation who, at great personal risk, helped hide those targeted by the Nazis. One nation, Denmark, saved most of its Jews in a nighttime rescue operation in 1943 in which Jews were ferried in fishing boats to safety in neutral Sweden.