
The Holocaust, 1933-1941-1945

Wichert ten Have and Maria van Haperen

‘Early in the morning of 1 June 1943, the names of those who were to depart for the east in the waiting freight train were read aloud in the deadly silence of the barracks. [...] We tried to boost each other’s morale. We are heading for the east, probably Poland. Perhaps we will meet family members there and friends who have already left. We will have to work hard and will suffer great deprivation. The summers will be hot and the winters freezing cold. But our spirits are high. We will not allow anyone or anything to dampen our spirits. [...] Of course, none of us knew exactly what was ahead of us. We had to make the best of it. We would do what we could to stay together and to survive the war. It was the only sensible thing you could say to each other in such circumstances. [...] After our carriage had been packed with as many people as possible and the door locked from the outside with massive hooks, De Vries did a headcount: there were 62 of us, plus a pram. With all of our baggage, we were like herrings packed in a barrel. There was barely any room to stretch your legs. [...] The first problem we tried to solve was that of deciding on the best position to make the journey, sitting or standing. There was no obvious answer that applied as a general rule. Some could sit as long as there were others who stood. The pram and the barrels also took up a lot of room. Even before the train left, the barrel was being put to use because many were unable to control their nerves. It was agreed that two women would take turns to hold up a coat when one of their fellow gender needed to use the barrel. Of course, the same applied for the men. As you can imagine, the stench in the carriage soon became unbearable.’¹

Jules Schelvis (b. 1921), survivor of the Holocaust from the Netherlands

Introduction

During World War II, approximately 5.7 million Jews were murdered by Nazi Germany. The dead were not victims of war, but they were killed because they were Jewish.

The Holocaust developed in stages, but its broad outlines were clear from the start. In the first phase of the war, ‘racially alien elements’, primarily Jews, but also Roma and Sinti, were to be purged from German territories. There were mass executions, starting from the invasion of Poland on 1 September 1939, but they intensified after the attack on the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941. By late 1941, there was a policy to deport the Jews and ultimately murder all of them.

This happened mainly by suffocating the victims on an industrial scale in specially designed camps with gas chambers and crematoria. All of this called for a massive logistic operation, which was carefully prepared and carried out, not only by special officers but also by officials from the regular services, such as the railways. These factors make the extermination of the Jews a genocide without a precedent.

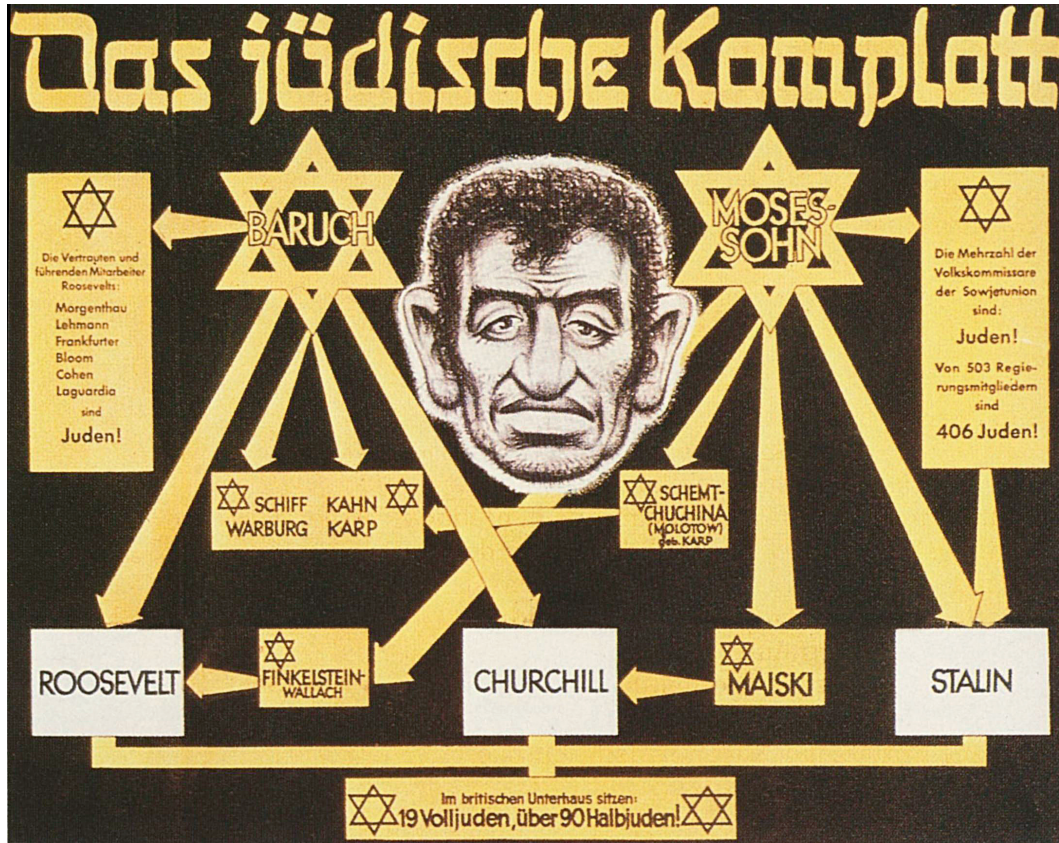
Holocaust

Over the years, the murder of European Jews has been given various different names. After World War II, very little was generally said in public about the atrocities. Raoul Hilberg, pioneering historian of the Holocaust, spoke of the ‘destruction of the Jews’. The well-known television series *The Holocaust* (1978) brought the persecution and ultimate murder of European Jews to wider public attention. The concept of ‘Holocaust’ (from the ancient Greek ‘sacrifice by fire’) had already been in existence, but would now be used internationally to describe the tragedy of the murder of the Jews. This is reflected in the name for Holocaust Memorial Day on 27 January, the date designated by the United Nations to commemorate the murder of the Jews. The name is also used as a title for many museums and centres devoted to the subject. Others, and especially Jews themselves, prefer to use the term ‘Shoah’, the Hebrew word for catastrophe.

Some historians consider the persecution in the 1930s to be an integral part of the Holocaust. Others argue that the Holocaust started in the autumn of 1941, when Nazi Germany began to organise and carry out the mass extermination of the Jews. Primarily because of the anti-Semitism involved, some people use the term Holocaust specifically to describe the extermination of the Jews. Others argue that other persecuted groups, such as the Roma, should also be considered victims of the Holocaust.

1. Historical background

The persecution of the Jews did not take place in isolation. The Holocaust must be placed in the wider context of World War II and associated violence, such as the murder of millions of Polish and Russian prisoners of war. The area of Eastern Europe and the west of the Soviet Union was the scene of mass violence of many different kinds.



'The Jewish conspiracy'

Source: Beeldbank WO2 – NIOD

The Holocaust would have been unthinkable without anti-Semitism, a deep-rooted hatred of Jews. This hatred originated from early Christianity. The myth that the Jews were guilty of Christ's death was particularly persistent. Jews were also accused of the ritual murder of Christians. In times of disasters, such as plagues, Jews served as scapegoats. As a result of negative stereotyping, Jews were excluded from many professions and forced into exile or even tortured and killed in pogroms.

After the French Revolution, Jews in Western and Central Europe were accorded equal rights. However, after the 19th century, Jews were also deemed to be responsible for the negative consequences of industrialisation and individualisation. Jews were blamed for instigating capitalism for their own gain. Similar accusations were made about socialism. Developments in science brought about ideas on race and evolution that fostered the emergence of a new racial anti-Semitism. According to this race theory, Jews were 'alien to the people' and deemed to be a 'problem'. The term 'Jewish question' (*Judenfrage*) had originally been used in the context of

18 a debate about the emancipation of the Jews. But now, this 'inferior race' was a 'problem' for which radical anti-Semites believed a solution had to be found.

Anti-Semitism

Anti-Semitism was an international phenomenon. After World War I in Germany, anti-Semitism became part of the prevailing sense of dissatisfaction. The wounded sense of national pride went hand-in-hand with distaste for the new, democratic Weimar Republic and a yearning for a strong, authoritarian state. This growing nationalism became a breeding ground for anti-Semitism in Germany, which enabled National Socialism to flourish. The human ideal was 'Aryan', which meant blond hair, blue eyes and 'Germanic' blood. There was no room for other 'races', for the disabled or those deemed antisocial.

Since their rise to power in 1933, the Nazi party had fiercely suppressed their political opponents. Discrimination and persecution of Jews and Roma also began to take hold. This policy became enshrined in racist legislation. The Jews, who until then had often considered themselves to be completely German, became isolated and were deprived of their rights. The Nuremberg Laws of 1935 prohibited relationships and marriages between 'racially pure Germans' and others. During the pogrom on 9 and 10 November 1938, this anti-Semitism broke out into violence. On *Kristallnacht*, the windows of Jewish shops were smashed and Jewish property stolen. But that was not all: on that night, many Jews were also attacked and even murdered. Jews were arrested to encourage others to emigrate. Even before the war, it was clear to the Nazis that there would be no room for the Jews in the Germany they envisioned.

2. World War II

During the 1930s, tens of thousands of Jews emigrated from Germany and Austria, leaving behind most of their possessions. There had long been ideas about enforced emigration, including a plan to send the Jews to Madagascar. National Socialists at all levels were accustomed to the use of violence in anti-Semitic operations.

In the autumn of 1939, Germany conquered Poland. As the German army advanced to the east, a wave of mass murders began. According to the plan, these were targeted at the Polish elite: intellectuals, priests, officers and political leaders. In the secret part of the pact between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, known as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, Poland was divided in two, with one part under the Soviet and one under the German sphere of influence. Central and Western Poland became part of the German Reich, with the central section being renamed Wartheland. What remained, including the cities of Warsaw, Lviv and Kraków, was ruled as a protectorate under the name Generalgovernment. The plan was for Poland to be prepared for habitation and exploitation by Germans. The Slav people were considered to be inferior and at best to be used for slave labour. Space, or *Lebensraum*, was to be created through the forced migration of hundreds of thousands

of Poles from west to east, including many Jews. Two million Jews came under Nazi control as a result of the victory over Poland. After the military campaign, special units were sent into the country to fight 'enemies of the Reich'. As well as the Polish elite, many Jews also fell victim. Thousands of them died at the end of 1939. A plan had now been drawn up to deport all Jews to some kind of reservation on the eastern border of German-occupied Poland. In the autumn of 1939, Polish and Austrian Jews were already being deported. In 1940, the deportations temporarily stopped because the General Government faced problems accommodating all of the Jews there. Throughout these operations, countless Jews were murdered by the SS and the police.

2.1 The isolation of the Jews

The German authorities had now begun to establish ghettos. Bringing Jews together would make deportation at a later stage easier. Until then, the Jews had to carry out forced labour. In February 1940 a ghetto was established in the industrial city of Łódź that would serve as a model ghetto for the Germans.

These ghettos were soon overpopulated and had few amenities. Forced labour was part of life in a ghetto. The Germans appointed representatives of the Jewish population, who would be responsible for organising internal governance as the Jewish Council (*Judenrat*), but who

Jews flee from a town in Lithuania, 1939.
Source: Beeldbank WO2 – NIOD



20 were otherwise completely dependent on the Germans. Conditions in the ghettos such as Łódź, Warsaw, Lublin and many others varied, but were usually terrible.

Since early 1940, Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, Belgium and France had all been occupied by Germany. Here too, the Jews were deprived of their civil rights, and were persecuted like the Jews in Germany. Across the occupied and captured territories, Jews were forced into ghettos or deported to the Polish region around Lublin. In the meantime, mentally handicapped people from Germany and elsewhere had been transferred to special institutions, where they became victims of the euthanasia programme on Hitler's orders.

Aktion T4 — Euthanasia programme

From the end of the 1930s, Hitler ordered a programme of euthanasia to be carried out on people who were deemed 'unworthy' to live, referring to the disabled and the mentally or incurably ill. From 1940, gassing experiments were conducted within this programme. The *Aktion T4* doctors developed a method which could be used to gas 20 patients at the same time. Following church protests, the programme was abandoned, but not before 360,000 people had been killed. The *Aktion T4* experiences proved very useful in the destruction of the Jewish population. This operation took its name from the headquarters of the Nazi euthanasia programme, which was based in Tiergartenstrasse 4, in Berlin.

All the necessary conditions for genocide were in place by the spring of 1941. Thousands of Jews had already been deported and murdered. Those who remained were isolated from the rest of society, forced to live in unhygienic conditions and desperately short of food.

3. After the invasion of Russia

On 22 June 1941, German troops invaded the Soviet Union in what was known as Operation Barbarossa. They expected to vanquish the Red Army within a few months. As soon as the first territories were conquered, there were systematic mass murders of Jews. An order had been issued for all communists captured to be killed. Special units, known as *Einsatzgruppen*, followed the front line to see off potential enemies. They were supported by police and *Wehrmacht* units. Partisans were executed. The *Einsatzgruppen* soon turned to the Jews, and executed hundreds of thousands of them.

3.1 War of annihilation

In the months before the attack on the Soviet Union, Hitler had informed his most important generals of his war plans. He warned that this would not be a conventional war, 'but a *war of annihilation*'.²

According to Hitler, it was imperative that the attack on Russia achieved a military conquest which would enable the Third Reich to last for 1000 years. In his view, Russia had the inex-



Jews in Krakau, Poland, 1940
Source: Beeldbank WO2 — NIOD

haustible economic reserves and the *Lebensraum* the German people needed. A war against Bolsheviks and Jews could therefore be very little else than a war of annihilation. They were the sworn enemies of National Socialism.

20-8-1941

'[...] We talk about the Jewish question. The *Führer* believes that his prophecy in the *Reichstag* has been confirmed: if the Jews were successful in provoking another world war, this war would lead to their own annihilation. With almost unnerving accuracy, this prophecy is being confirmed in these weeks and months. In the east, the Jews must now pay the price [...] Jewry is a foreign body among civilised peoples and their behaviour in the last 30 years has been so devastating that the response of these peoples is completely understandable, necessary, and yes, even completely natural. In any case, in the world to come, the Jews will not have much to laugh about. In Europe, there is already a united front against Jewry.'³

Diary entry by Joseph Goebbels

22 The Germans were supported by anti-Communist militias from Ukraine, Lithuania and elsewhere. Most of the population was anti-Russian and anti-Communist. There often was a deep-rooted anti-Semitism among the population. After two decades of independence, the Baltic countries were again occupied by the Russians in June 1940. Large groups of the population were deported. Many Baltic and Ukrainian nationalists blamed the Jews for this and welcomed the arrival of the German troops.

Until the autumn of 1941, the mass slaughter of the Jews spread. Women and children now fell victim as well. This more radical approach was encouraged by Heinrich Himmler, *Reichsführer* of the SS, and Reinhard Heydrich, head of the Security Police and Security Service (SiPo and SD). In Latvia and Lithuania, men were ordered to carry out forced labour. Women and children were systematically murdered. In rural areas, many Jews, including the men, were murdered with the help of local anti-Communist militia. On 7 and 8 December 1941, there was a notorious series of murders in which 20,000 Jews were killed. Outside Vilnius in Lithuania, in the Ponary Forest, there were regular mass executions between July 1941 and July 1944. Local people were often encouraged by the Germans to take part in the murdering.

In Ukraine in the summer of 1941, SS units and the police began to murder Jewish women and children as well as men. The Jews were collected in the cities. The Jewish men were forced to dig pits and trenches just outside the city. All victims were marched to the place of execution, where they were shot row by row. This pattern was repeated in many places.

When the capital Kiev was captured, all the Jews in the city were ordered to assemble. On 29 and 30 September 1941, 33,771 Jews were shot dead on the edge of a ravine in Babi Yar outside the city. Afterwards, the edges were blown up to cover the bodies with earth. In Belarus, a second series of murders followed some months later, killing tens of thousands of Jews.

Many hundreds of thousands of Jews were murdered in the areas of the Soviet Union captured by the Germans. It was almost impossible to escape these deadly campaigns. Some Jews survived by fleeing further eastwards, to the areas still held by the Soviets. However, the persecution of the Jews was not limited to Poland and the former Soviet Union territories. In Serbia, there had been a German military administration since the spring of 1941, supported by a regime of collaborators. Thousands of Jews, including women and children, were 'brought to justice'. In Romania, it was the country's own military and police units that deported the Jews and Roma. Sometimes, the executions took place in Romania itself. In Odessa, there was a mass execution ordered by Romanian dictator Ion Antonescu, killing around 25,000 Jews.

4. The final solution

In August and September 1941, the German advance into the Soviet Union stagnated. The Red Army was offering resistance. In late 1941, Germany began the deportation of Jews to Poland. It had now become clear that the developments in the war would prevent the Jews from being driven further to the east.

'[...] After the Germans came, we did not know what to do, it was appalling.

Eventually, we were told we were to be deported. We were allowed to take 20 kg of luggage and fifty zloty per person. They locked up half of the town. They sent the rest to Izbica and Wieprz. The people transported included both poor and rich Jews.

[...] On arrival in Izbica, everyone was allocated a dwelling. Usually, three families had to share one house. If you were lucky, there were just two families in one house. But some people had to share a house with four families, which was extremely cramped.

[...] It was not long before we heard that more were arriving from Kulice. This made it extremely cramped in the ghetto. It was a really small town, where around 200 Jews had lived before the war. The synagogue was in the middle. Space was so limited, that Jews had to live on the gallery in the synagogue. And then there were transports from Czechoslovakia and from Berlin. People began to sell their possessions, because they had no income. You were not allowed out, at five o'clock everything was locked.

The Jewish Council also ensured that people went to work. But because they were beaten, people no longer wanted to work. So people who had nothing left, and no longer knew what to do, would suggest: "If you give me five zloty, I will work for you." I had to live on something and had no choice. I had my family to care for.⁴

Chaskiel Menche (1910-1984), survivor of Sobibor

The ghettos in the German-controlled areas were overpopulated and unable to accommodate Jews deported from the West. Attempts were made to find more radical and definitive solutions. The local initiatives reflected the wishes of Berlin. In Chelmno, Western Poland, an extermination camp was established, intended solely to kill people. More than 150,000 Jews and Roma would be murdered in this camp in the period up to 1943. Previous experience acquired with the disabled in the *Aktion T4* programme was deployed. The victims were now driven into freight trucks. The exhaust gases from the engines in the sealed freight trucks suffocated them within twenty minutes.

These were the first steps in the final solution, the *Endlösung*, as the Nazi leaders envisaged it. On 12 December 1941, Hitler addressed the meeting of party managers on the 'Jewish question'.⁵ As Goebbels noted in his diary, Hitler argued that he wanted a final solution to the problem. He had warned the Jews that if they were to cause another world war, they would thereby bring about their own annihilation. As the Second World War was now a fact, the annihilation of the Jewish people should be the result, according to Hitler's logic.

Hitler and the extermination of the Jews

The personal role of Hitler in the Holocaust has long been a subject for discussion among historians. Was the annihilation of the Jews part of a plan he had long prepared? Or was it something that gradually became a reality, as a result of the actions

of national and local Nazi officers? There is no doubt that the realisation of Hitler's idea of annihilating the Jews was influenced by circumstances. In September or October 1941, the decision to murder all Jews must have been taken at the highest level, in line with Hitler's views; and carried out by Nazi officers who took action that reflected the *Führer's* views. This would have been unthinkable without widespread, murderous anti-Semitism.

Heinrich Himmler took responsibility for overall supervision of the *Endlösung*. Reinhard Heydrich was given the task of coordinating implementation. The SS officer and *Regierungsrat* Adolph Eichmann, head of subdepartment IV B 4 of the *Reichssicherheitshauptamt* (Main Security Office, RSHA), was responsible for the organisation of the deportation of the Jews outside of the Reich and the Soviet Union.

On 20 January 1942, the Wannsee Conference was held in Berlin, where Heydrich informed leading officials from ministries and administrative bodies in the East about the policy against the Jews. The minutes still referred to *Endlösung* and labour. In reality, those present were told about the necessity to collaborate in the murder of all European Jews. Heydrich, assisted by Eichmann, spoke of the need to eradicate the Jews. For example, they would gradually be driven in colonies towards the east, constructing roads as they progressed. Many would die in the process. Any survivors were to be dealt with accordingly. In this context, 'practical experience... [was] already being collected which is of the greatest importance in relation to the future final solution of the Jewish question'. This was a reference to the methods of extermination to be used later, such as gassing.

4.1 *Aktion Reinhardt*

From October 1941, preparations were made in the General Government for the mass extermination of the Jews. There were already executions in numerous places. Officials from the west who were experienced with the 'euthanasia programme' were transferred to Lublin. This experience was to be used in Poland. It became clear that the new campaigns to exterminate Jews were primarily to be organised within the General Government. Starting in March 1942, the SS and the police cleared the ghettos.

On 27 March 1942, Heydrich fell victim to an attack by the Czech resistance. From then on, the General Government operation was known as *Aktion Reinhardt*, or Operation Reinhardt. *Aktion Reinhardt* was under the central control of SS officer Odilo Globocnik. Jews were now being hunted down across the whole area. On the orders of Himmler, any men fit for work were put in camps. The remaining Jews were assembled and murdered on the spot or deported. The final destination of these deportations was the extermination camps of *Aktion Reinhardt*. Only death awaited there.

'We were taken away in 1943. Early in the morning, at around five o'clock, we were woken by shots. SS officers forced their way into our houses and marched all the Jews to the market square. At first, we hoped they would take us to a labour camp.

We had heard about Sobibor. After being transported, we found ourselves opposite a large gate. I remember that it was only marked *SS-Sonderkommando*. This was Sobibor.

Then the gate was opened and we went in. I could not believe that this was an extermination camp, because it looked so nice. It was 23 April 1943. The sun was shining and it seemed like a beautiful summer's day. I knew we were going to die, but, at the same time, I could not believe it. It was just so beautiful there. When people had talked about an extermination camp, I had imagined a dangerous place, something that the Jews called *gehenn*, like hell. In those kinds of places, people are dirty and roam around and you can see fire everywhere. But here I saw a beautiful village, with a nice little station, although I could see fire two hundred metres ahead. I realised that this was the end.

Suddenly I heard a voice that said: "Men to the right, women and children to the left." I was standing next to my mother, my younger brother was next to my father. I was fifteen. I'm still not tall, but then I was small and thin. I thought I had no chance of survival.'⁶

Thomas Blatt (b. 1927), Sobibor survivor

In addition to the existing camp in Chelmo, three special extermination camps were established: Belzec (March 1942), in the east of Poland, for the extermination of Jews from Lublin and Lviv and the surrounding area; Sobibor (May 1942), also in the east, for the gassing of Dutch, French and Polish Jews; and Treblinka (July 1942), north-east of Warsaw, intended for the extermination of Jews from the Warsaw ghetto and across Poland. When the gas chambers and crematoria had been completed, this would mean death by suffocation. The murders reached their climax between July and November 1942. Hundreds of thousands of people were sent to the extermination camps by train. During this period, more than two million Jews were killed in the gas chambers.

Aktion Reinhardt

Estimated number of deaths⁷:

Belzec	435,000
Sobibor	170,000
Treblinka	850,000

4.2 Auschwitz

Chelmo and the Majdanek concentration camp, built alongside Polish Lublin, were also used as extermination camps after 1942, as was Auschwitz. Starting in May 1940, the former complex of barracks at Auschwitz was adapted for the imprisonment of Polish opponents of the Nazi

26 regime. Later, there were other nationalities, prisoners of war, political and ideological opponents of the Nazis, resistance fighters who had been captured and the disabled. In March 1941, construction started on Birkenau, a few kilometres from Auschwitz. In September 1941, the first experiments with the deadly gas Zyklon-B were conducted in the crematoria.

Birkenau was taken into use in the spring of 1942. By this time, Auschwitz was also operating as an extermination camp. The first trains packed with Jews started to arrive in March 1942. At the end of 1942, the first groups of Sinti and Roma were being deported to Birkenau. Unlike in the 'Aktion Reinhardt' camps, there was a selection on arrival: deportees who were capable of working were separated from those sent straight to the gas chambers. Initially, the gas chambers were improvised bunkers, but in 1944 new gas chambers began to be used in Birkenau. The train line was extended right into the camp, so that thousands of people could be exterminated every day. With the arrival of the Hungarian Jews in May 1944, the extermination of the Jews in Auschwitz-Birkenau reached its climax. This mass murder on an industrial scale of more than one million people made Auschwitz a symbol of the extermination of the Jews.⁸

Auschwitz as a symbol of the Holocaust

Auschwitz-Birkenau, Monowitz and the approximately 40 other neighbouring camps became the largest complex of concentration and extermination camps.

On 27 January 1945, an advance guard of Red Army troops freed the 7,000 prisoners who remained in the camp. Approximately 1.3 million people were murdered in Auschwitz. In the 1990s, 27 January was declared as International Holocaust Memorial Day by the United Nations .

5. Persecution of the Jews in other countries

Allies of Nazi Germany also persecuted Jews, sometimes on their own initiative, sometimes under German pressure. In Croatia, Slovakia and Romania, countless Jews died as a result of persecution. Bulgaria, however, refused to surrender its own Jews. Finland also successfully resisted the German policy of persecution. In the non-occupied part of France, the Vichy regime surrendered only foreign Jews.

In the occupied areas, the local authorities also had to deal with the Nazi policy of persecution. The German occupying authorities pushed hard for the deportation of the Jews. Following the deportation of foreign Jews from occupied France on 26 March 1942, the yellow star badge was introduced as a recognisable symbol, marking the start of the systematic persecution of all Jews. The same happened in the Netherlands and Belgium. There was a continuous stream of trains departing from the Netherlands, with the assistance of the local authorities, deporting people not only to Auschwitz, but also to Sobibor. This meant that the percentage of Jews who survived the war in the Netherlands was extremely low in relative terms.

Denmark enjoyed semi-independent status thanks to a treaty with Germany. When the Ger-



Gas chamber in Auschwitz
Source: Beeldbank W02 — NIOD

mans began to persecute the Jewish population here too, the resistance succeeded in evacuating 7,000 (of 8,000 in total) Jews safely to Sweden. Other Danish Jews were deported to the Theresienstadt camp, just one of the stop-off points en route to the extermination camps.

In Greece, Jews were systematically persecuted. Starting in March 1943, the large Jewish community from Thessaloniki was transported to Auschwitz.

In Italy, Mussolini's Fascist regime gradually introduced anti-Semitic legislation. After occupation by Nazi Germany, the systematic persecution of the Jews became an everyday reality.

In Hungary, Jews were persecuted and imprisoned by Hungarian right-wing militia. However, the regime itself did not hand over the Jews to the Germans. But after the occupation by Nazi Germany in March 1944, 437,000 Hungarian Jews were transported to Auschwitz, where most of them were murdered.

5.1 The Holocaust in Eastern and Western Europe

The position and the experience of the Holocaust victims — the Jews, but also the Roma and Sinti — in different parts of Europe often varied greatly.

The Jews in Germany had been subjected to persecution since 1933. Tens of thousands of them had emigrated, and the Jews who remained behind were at the mercy of the Nazi terror.

In the occupied areas of Poland, the Baltic countries and the western Soviet Union, Jews were shot by the ten thousand or hundred thousand in mass executions, often in their home town, village or region. From 1942 onwards millions of Jews were sent to death camps where they were exterminated. The violence was also directed against other citizens and against prisoners of war from the Soviet Union. These areas in Eastern Europe have been referred to as 'bloodlands' (Timothy Snyder) and described as 'extremely violent societies' (Christian Gerlach).

In Western Europe the Jews were often part of a small minority. The German occupation regimes initially created the impression that they wanted to implement a moderate policy towards the Jews. The National Socialists viewed the Northern Europeans as racially related. Anti-Jewish measures were implemented gradually. Despite the processes of identification, isolation, expropriation and deportation, the chances of survival for Jews in Western Europe were higher than in the East. The large majority of Jews who were deported to Poland were exterminated in the death camps.

The Jews who remained in Western Europe had two important means of survival: in some cases they were able to flee to a neutral country such as Switzerland or Sweden; others escaped the violence by going into hiding. There were also Jews who in some way or other managed to conceal the fact that they were Jewish. In all of these cases they were forced to rely on help from others.

The fate of the Jews varied per country. In fascist Italy, anti-Semitism was not at the heart of the ideology of the regime although anti-Semitic legislation did come into effect in 1938. Italy was relatively safe for Jews, even those who had fled from German-occupied France. France in 1940 was home to some 300,000 to 320,000 Jews, most of whom did not have French nationality, or had only recently acquired it. In Belgium there were around 55,600 Jews, 95% of whom were non-Belgian. Denmark and Norway had few refugees; the total number of Jews in these countries was 8,000 and 2,000 respectively, making up 0.18 % of the population of Denmark and 0.05 % of the population of Norway.

A large proportion of Dutch Jews did not survive the persecution.

The situation in the Netherlands was almost the opposite. There were around 118,000 Dutch Jews as well as almost 22,000 Jewish refugees from Germany and Austria. The proportion of Jews deported from the Netherlands and murdered was exceptionally high: 75 %. In Belgium this was 40 % and in France 25 %. There is no single explanation for this high percentage in the Netherlands. People have pointed to the level of integration of Dutch Jews and the geographical limitations to resistance as well as to the cooperation with the German occupiers by the Dutch authorities and the nature of the occupying regime.



Deportationstrain France
Bron: Beeldbank W02 — NIOD

6. The victims

‘Our language lacks words to describe this offence [...]’⁹

Primo Levi, writer and camp survivor

Writing about the fate of the victims can never do justice to the suffering they faced. The testimony of survivors is an important source of information on the experiences of the Holocaust victims.

Around 1942, most Jews in Poland and Eastern Europe lived in ghettos or in isolated parts of cities and villages. Their living conditions had worsened horribly: many, including numerous children and elderly, died of starvation and exhaustion. In the major persecution and extermination operations of 1942, the situation deteriorated: the SS and police dragged people from their homes. The disabled and children were often shot on the spot. Attempts to escape or

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OPROEPING!

Aan



L 185 No. 9

Cypresstr 82 Den Haag.

U moet zich voor eventueele deelname aan een, onder politietoezichtstaande, werk-
verruiming in Duitschland voor persoonsonderzoek en geneeskundige keuring naar het door-
gangskamp Westerbork, station Hoghalen, begeven.

Daartoe moet U op 18 AUG. 1942 om 1.00 uur

op de verzamelplaats DEN HAAG STAATSSPOOR — ZIE BIJLAGE aanwezig zijn

Als bagage mag medegenomen worden:

- 1 koffer of rugzak
- 1 paar werklarzen
- 2 paar sokken
- 2 onderbroeken
- 2 hemden
- 1 werkpak
- 2 wollen dekens
- 2 stel beddengoed (overtrek met laken)
- 1 eetnap
- 1 drinkbeker
- 1 lepel en
- 1 pullover
- handdoek en toiletartikelen

en eveneens marschproviand voor 3 dagen en de voor die tijd geldige distributiekarten.
De mee te nemen bagage moet in gedeelten gepakt worden.

a. **Noodzakelijke reisbehoeften**

daartoe behooren: 2 dekens, 1 stel beddegoed, levensmiddelen voor 3 dagen, toiletgerei,
etensbord, eetbestek, drinkbeker,

b. **Groote bagage**

De onder b. vermelde bagage moet worden gepakt in een stevige koffer of rugzak,
welke op duidelijke wijze voorzien moet zijn van **naam, voornamen, geboortedatum
en het woord „Holland”**.

Gezinsbagage is niet toegestaan.

Het voorgaande moet nauwkeurig in acht genomen worden, daar de groote bagage in
de plaats van vertrek afzonderlijk ingeladen wordt.

De verschillende bewijs- en persoonspapieren mogen **niet bij de bagage verpakt
worden**, doch moeten, voor onmiddellijk vertoon gereed, medege dragen worden.

De woning moet ordelijk achtergelaten en afgesloten worden, de huissleutels moeten
worden medegenomen.

Niet medegenomen mogen worden: levend huisraad.

K 372



Deportation from Amsterdam, the Netherlands, 20 June 1943
 Source: Beeldbank WO2 — NIOD

signs of disobedience were met with gunfire. Sometimes there was a selection process after which Jews who were capable of working for the Germans could remain with their families: they had no choice but to stand by and watch as others were taken away. In Eastern Poland, they were mainly shot dead outside the towns and cities. In the west, the Jews were assembled in stations and deported in miserable conditions, without facilities, in overfull freight trains to the extermination camps. In the camp, they were removed from the trains by Trawniki workers, who often originated from Ukraine. Some of them former prisoners of war, they had been trained in camp Trawniki. Everything was then removed from the victims: possessions, jewellery, money and clothing. Their hair was shaved off. Often the Jews were told that they were going to shower, to disinfect them. Then they were led into the gas chambers. Some Jews were selected to work in *Sonderkommandos* in the gas chambers. They were forced to remove the bodies from the gas chambers, take any gold and silver from the teeth and carry away the corpses. Initially, they were thrown into mass graves, but when these were full, the bodies were incinerated in crematoria. Here too, the hard work was left to the Jewish *Sonderkommandos*.



'Der Ewige Jude'

Source: Beeldbank W02 — NIOD

Roma and Sinti

Roma and Sinti, sometimes referred to by others as gypsies, had been victims of discrimination and persecution for centuries. When the National Socialists came to power in Germany in 1933, this persecution intensified. Like the Jews, they were seen as a threat to society. Roma and Sinti were incarcerated in camps and were often sterilised. Like the Jewish population, Roma and Sinti were also deported by train to camps in Eastern Europe. In Auschwitz-Birkenau, a special 'Gypsy camp' was established, in which all residents were murdered in August 1944. Estimates vary on the exact total number of victims. They range from 100,000 to 300,000.

6.1 Jewish and other resistance

In the spring of 1942 it became clear that the Germans intended to clear the ghettos. The chairman of the Jewish Council in the Warsaw ghetto, Adam Czerniakov, was ordered to designate 5,000 Jews to be deported every day. Aware of their fate and unable to prevent it, Czerniakov committed suicide. Almost daily, residents from the ghetto were taken by train to the extermi-

nation camp Treblinka. In early September 1942, the Germans assembled all the Jews who were not fit for work. In just a few weeks, more than 250,000 people, including nearly all children, were taken away and murdered.

In 1943, the remaining Jews in the east were taken to concentration camps. When it became clear that even the Jews who had stayed in the ghetto were to be deported, a desperate, but fierce resistance ensued. In the fighting that followed, thousands of Jewish fighters were killed. There were also uprisings in other places, for example in the Bialystok ghetto and even in the Treblinka and Sobibor extermination camps. In Sobibor, a number of prisoners succeeded in escaping and joined the resistance.

Jews also resisted persecution in other ways. Many attempted to flee, to hide or take refuge, with the support of local people willing to help. Others took part in resistance activities or joined the partisans. However, resistance and uprisings often resulted in reprisals. In these revenge operations, many innocent people were killed by the Germans, all civilians, among them many Jews. During *Aktion Erntefest* in November 1943, the SS and police units shot dead 42,000 Jews from various camps in just a few days. Some of the Jews who were fit for work were brought together in the remaining concentration camps.

6.2 International responses

There was hardly any help for the Jews. There were occasional cases of ingenious interventions. A well-known example is that of the Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg, who saved thousands of Jews in Budapest by issuing them with Swedish passports. Despite this and other individual actions, it was not possible to prevent the genocide. Sparse but accurate reports about the mass murders gradually filtered through to the Allies. One example came from SS officer Kurt Gerstein, who took the risk of informing the outside world about what was happening in Belzec.

‘[...] A few minutes later a train arrived from Lviv, with 45 carriages holding 6,000 people, of whom 1,450 were already dead on arrival. Behind the small, barbed wire window, terrified children, young people, men and women. The train pulled in and 200 Ukrainians, equipped for the task, opened the doors and lashed the people with their whips. The Jews crept out of the cars.

A loudspeaker issued instructions: to remove all clothing, even artificial limbs and glasses. A young Jewish boy handed out pieces of string for people to tie their shoes together. All valuables and money had to be handed in at the ticket window marked Valuables, no tickets or receipts were issued. Women and girls were to have their hair cut off in the Barber’s barracks.

[...] They gradually came closer to the place where I was standing with Wirth, in front of the gas chambers. Men, women, young girls, children, babies, cripples, all of them completely naked, walking past in a row. On the corner, a sturdy SS officer stood, with a loud



Cleaning out the Warsaw Ghetto, 1943
Source: Beeldbank WO2 — NIOD

unctuous voice. “Nothing will happen to you,” he said to the poor souls. “All you have to do is breathe in deeply. It strengthens the lungs. Breathing in prevents infectious diseases. It is a good way of disinfecting.” They asked what was going to happen to them. He told them: “The men will have to build houses and roads. But women do not have to do that; they can do housework or help in the kitchen.” For some of the poor wretches, this did the trick; it was enough to get them into the gas chambers without resistance. Most knew the truth. The stench made it clear what their fate was. They walked into the gas chambers along a narrow staircase, most saying nothing, forced forward by those behind them. A Jewish woman of around forty, with eyes like coals, cursed her murderers. Encouraged by the lashes from Captain Wirth’s whip, she too disappeared into the gas chamber. Many prayed, whilst others asked: “Who will give us water to wash the dead?”¹⁰

Kurt Gerstein, SS-Officer, 1942

His reports and those of others would not bring help for the victims. Sometimes the horrific stories were not believed. Misunderstanding, disbelief and a lack of will prevented any help from being provided to the persecuted Jews. Intervention was not part of the allied strategy, who put overall victory above everything.

7. The end of the war, the end of persecution

As the defeat of the Third Reich became apparent and the Red Army approached, the Nazis realised that the mass graves should not be discovered. Orders were given to erase all traces of the Nazi crimes. Bodies were dug up and incinerated. Remains of extermination camps were razed to the ground. It did not prove possible to eradicate all evidence of mass murder. Auschwitz was liberated by the Red Army on 27 January 1945. It became the symbol for the Holocaust.

In the final phase of the war, the German SS and police committed countless atrocities. They murdered prisoners. They forced the survivors in concentration camps to head west. Sometimes by train, but often by foot, in terrible conditions. Even in retreat, the SS guards did not hesitate to murder the weak or those who tried to flee. Many people also died from sickness and disease. These journeys have since become known as the Death Marches.

The survivors ended up in camps in the West, where they were eventually liberated by the Allies. Many still died from illness and exhaustion after that. Others had to live with the memory of the suffering they had been through and the realisation that many of their family members and friends had not survived the persecution.

Living Jewish culture in Europe had been wiped out, but anti-Semitism persisted in post-war society. The survivors needed a great deal of courage to build a new life in Europe, Israel or elsewhere. For many, it was too harrowing to tell of their experiences. In recent decades, attempts have been made to record their testimonies and memories as much as possible.

8. Aftermath and justice

The number of perpetrators of this genocide, those who organised it and the perpetrators of the actual crimes themselves, runs into hundreds of thousands. From 22 November 1945 until 31 August 1946, the Nuremberg trials took place in Germany, lasting nine months. The trials were held on a grand scale, with four judges and four prosecuting counsels, from the United States, Great Britain, the Soviet Union and France. The court sat 403 times, heard testimonies from 166 witnesses and studied thousands of statements and hundreds of thousands of documents. 24 men were tried, as they were considered to be the most important war criminals. 12 of them were sentenced to death. At that time, the terms genocide and Holocaust were not yet in use. The suspects were accused of war crimes and crimes against humanity. Since 1946, there have been numerous trials, but even in 2011, many suspects remain unpunished.

Internationally, the trial against Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem in 1961 was particularly significant. Eichmann had escaped to South America after the war, ending up in Argentina, where he was kidnapped by the Israeli secret service. He was sentenced to death. His trial brought the Holocaust to international attention. The important question of individual responsibility for shared guilt and crimes was raised loud and clear for all who wished to hear it.

Specific character

In total, approximately 5.7 million Jews were murdered. The Nazi goal to murder all Jews was not achieved. Despite the unfathomable numbers, this is an important fact in determining the meaning of the Holocaust. It is this goal of murdering all Jews that, together with the murderous anti-Semitism, the mass executions, the rationally orchestrated operations, deportation trains, and industrially organised extermination camps, defines the specific character of the Holocaust.



Nuremberg trials. Front row: Goering, Hess, Von Ribbentrop, Keitel, Rosenberg, Frank, Frick, Streicher, Funk, Schacht. Back row: Donitz, Raeder, Von Schirach, Sauckel, Jodl, Von Papen, Seyss-Inquart, Speer, Von Neurath and Fritzsche. Source: National Archives and Records Administration