



The Holocaust

By Amy Elizabeth Robinson

The Holocaust was the murder of millions of Jews and other persecuted groups across Nazi-occupied Europe in World War II. Discussing it is among the most difficult and most necessary topics in history.

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A spiral of fascism

The early twentieth century saw new ideas for social progress. However, genocide was also a common feature of this time. Genocide is the planned killing of a large group of people, usually for their race or ethnicity. By the 1930s, many countries got caught up in trends like nationalism, authoritarian ideas like fascism, and imperialism. At first it was fascist politicians that supported these trends. However, “ordinary” people eventually started supporting them, too. People were filled with hatred, leaving little space for ideas like human rights. In Europe during World War II, the spiral of fascism resulted in a violent genocide we call the Holocaust.

The Holocaust was the cruel, intentional killing of millions of people. It was carried out by Adolf Hitler’s Nazi party, the German military, and their allies. The victims included 6 million European Jews, up to 1 million Roma people, 3 million Soviet prisoners-of-war (POWs), and several million non-Jewish Eastern European civilians. Hundreds of thousands of others were targeted because of their race, political beliefs, disability, religion, or sexual orientation. The killings happened in many forms. These included mass shootings and “extermination camps” such as Auschwitz.



This printed money was obsolete in Germany, but was reused in German Ghettos – notice the red stamp in the lower left. This gave Germans more control over Jews, because they could not easily accumulate money that would be valid outside the ghettos, public domain.

The violence of the Holocaust was unthinkable, but that’s why thinking about it is important. Although it’s hard, thinking about what went wrong is how we keep the Holocaust from happening again. In this article, we will see how the persecution of minority groups slowly intensified until it became a horrific society-wide genocide.

Origins and first steps before the Second World War

You have already seen how scientific racism and ideas about national “purity” inspired early twentieth-century fascism. You also learned a lot about European imperialism. These elements came together in a terrible way in Hitler’s wartime Germany.



On November 11, 1938, the day after the “night of broken glass,” it was clear how many Jewish owned business had been vandalized. Yet the majority of non-Jewish citizens did not protest, public domain.

The Nazis targeted many groups. However, they focused most on eliminating Jews in order to achieve a racially “pure” German nation. “Pure” Germans were thought to be of a superior, Aryan race. Even German children were taught about these racist ideas at school.

By 1933, these ideas became law. Jewish Germans had to identify themselves with armbands or yellow stars. In 1935, the Nazis passed the Nuremberg Laws. The law stripped Jews and Roma of German citizenship and banned certain interactions between Jews and “pure” Germans, including dating.

On November 9, 1938, many non-Jewish Germans rioted. The day is known as *Kristallnacht*, or “night of broken glass.” Fueled by anti-Jewish hatred, they destroyed Jewish synagogues, businesses, and other buildings. Around 30,000 Jewish males were detained and sent to concentration camps.

After *Kristallnacht*, Jews lost more civil rights. They were barred from public transport, parks, schools, and certain jobs. It was clear the Nazi state planned to get rid of the Jews by imprisoning them, sending them away, or worse.

Intensification after 1939

In 1939, the Holocaust grew more violent. The Soviets had invaded Poland. At the same time, Adolf Hitler had invaded Poland to create new territory for “Aryan” Germans.

Polish Jews were forced into crowded ghettos, which were parts of cities designed to house Jews. Countless Jews and others were killed in mass shootings. Others were sent to ghettos and labor camps. Those who escaped hid in the forest or joined resistance forces.



Mass grave discovered during the Liberation of Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp in April 1945. Public domain.

At the same time, the Nazis began the “T4” program. This program intentionally killed disabled teens, adults, and elderly people. Nazi Germany considered these groups “unfit” members of society.

The “Final Solution”

In late 1941, Hitler authorized a “final solution” to the “Jewish question.” The solution was the intentional mass murder of Jews in extermination camps. The camps were designed to gas to death and cremate mass numbers of inmates. By the end of WWII, over 3 million people were killed at these extermination camps.

Once they arrived in the camps, the Nazis chose some Jews for hard labor. Others were gassed to death immediately. The Nazis’ logic was cruel and racist. For example, they often gassed pregnant women because they believed they would continue the Jewish race. Many of those who survived the hard labor at the camps were later killed because the Nazis believed their strength was a danger. This genocide went on for over two years.

Who were the killers?

The horrors of the Holocaust went beyond extermination camps. Thousands of Jews died performing slave labor for German businesses in concentration camps. Others were murdered near their homes. The historian Omer Bartov has written that these murders were more personal than the murders in the extermination camps. The killers and the victims knew each other before the Holocaust. Bartov reminds us that the Holocaust could not have happened without the participation of German citizens.



Map showing the locations of the larger concentration camps, though there were others. Public domain.

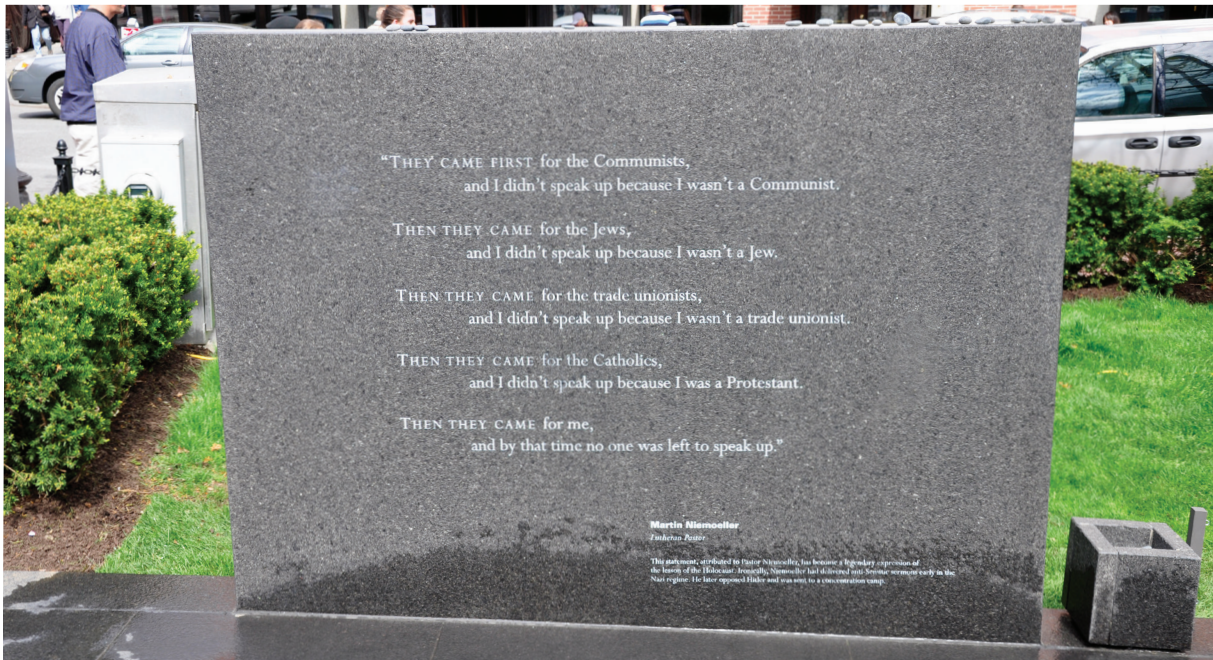
Historians have studied how “ordinary” Germans were pulled into the violence of the Holocaust. Some say they were attracted to the sense of belonging offered by fascism. They were surrounded by racist images and beliefs. In a way, the Holocaust was also just a more extreme version of the discrimination that already existed toward minority groups in Germany.

Gender also influenced the Holocaust. Hitler and other fascist leaders believed men belonged in the war, while women should stay home producing children for the nation. These beliefs took away women’s rights. Still, many women supported these beliefs because they felt like they were supporting their country.

Gisela Bock is a historian of women in Nazi Germany. She says that race is what really determined who died during the Holocaust. It’s possible men and women had different experiences. However, they were just different “different horrors inside the same Hell.” Bock also notes that anyone considered LGBTQ was also targeted.

We may always struggle with the horrors of the Holocaust. It can be hard to accept that so many people supported the killing, while so many others failed to speak out against it.

Fascism and the Holocaust destroyed a basic sense of human connection. In many ways, we are all still recovering. We have to be on the lookout for when our everyday compassion for people different from us disappears. Without compassion, there is always a danger of something like the Holocaust happening again.



[This memorial at the New England Holocaust Memorial in Boston, MA](#), shows an engraving of a poem attributed to the German pastor Martin Niemöller. It was a confession he made after the war, and was subsequently translated in a poetic style. There are different versions, but the text here reads: "They came first for the Communists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist / Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew / Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist / Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant / Then they came for me, and by that time no one was left to speak up." By Yunner, CC BY-SA 3.0.

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Image Credits

Cover: LONDON - DECEMBER 9: Auschwitz survivor Mr. Leon Greenman, prison number 98288, displays his number tattoo on December 9, 2004 at the Jewish Museum in London, England. Mr. Greenman O.B.E age 93 and a British citizen, spent three years of his life in six different concentration camps during World War II and since 1946 he has tirelessly recounted his life through his personal exhibition at the museum where he conducts educational events to all age groups. © Photo by Ian Waldie/ Getty Images

This printed money was obsolete in Germany, but was reused in German Ghettos – notice the red stamp in the lower left. This gave Germans more control over Jews, because they could not easily accumulate money that would be valid outside the ghettos. Public domain. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:GERMANY_1929,_OBSOLETE_20_REICHSMARK_PAPER_BILL_USED_WITH_TWO_INK_STAMPS_FOR_USE_IN_A_JEWISH_GHETTO_OR_CONCENTRATION_CAMP_side_A_-_Flickr_-_woody1778a.jpg

On November 11, 1938, the day after the "night of broken glass," it was clear how many Jewish owned business had been vandalized. Yet the majority of non-Jewish citizens did not protest. Public domain. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Kristallnacht#/media/File:The_day_after_Kristallnacht.jpg

Mass grave discovered during the liberation of the Liberation of Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp in April 1945. Public domain. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mass_Grave_at_Bergen-Belsen_concentration_camp_-_Fritz_Klein_-_IWM_BU4260.jpg

Map showing the locations of the larger concentration camps, though there were others. Public domain. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Major_Nazi_ConcentrationCamps_Europe_EL.jpeg

This memorial at the New England Holocaust Memorial in Boston, MA, shows an engraving of a poem attributed to the German pastor Martin Niemöller. By Yunner, CC BY-SA 3.0. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:New_England_Holocaust_Memorial_Stone.JPG



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