

# THE HOLOCAUST

The Holocaust was the systematic, bureaucratic, state-sponsored **persecution and murder of six million**

Jews by the Nazi regime and its collaborators between 1933 and 1945.

During the era of the Holocaust, Roma and Sinti, people with disabilities, and Poles were also targeted for destruction or decimation for racial, ethnic, or national reasons. Millions more, including gay men, Jehovah's Witnesses, Soviet prisoners of war and political dissidents, also suffered grievous oppression and death under Nazi tyranny.

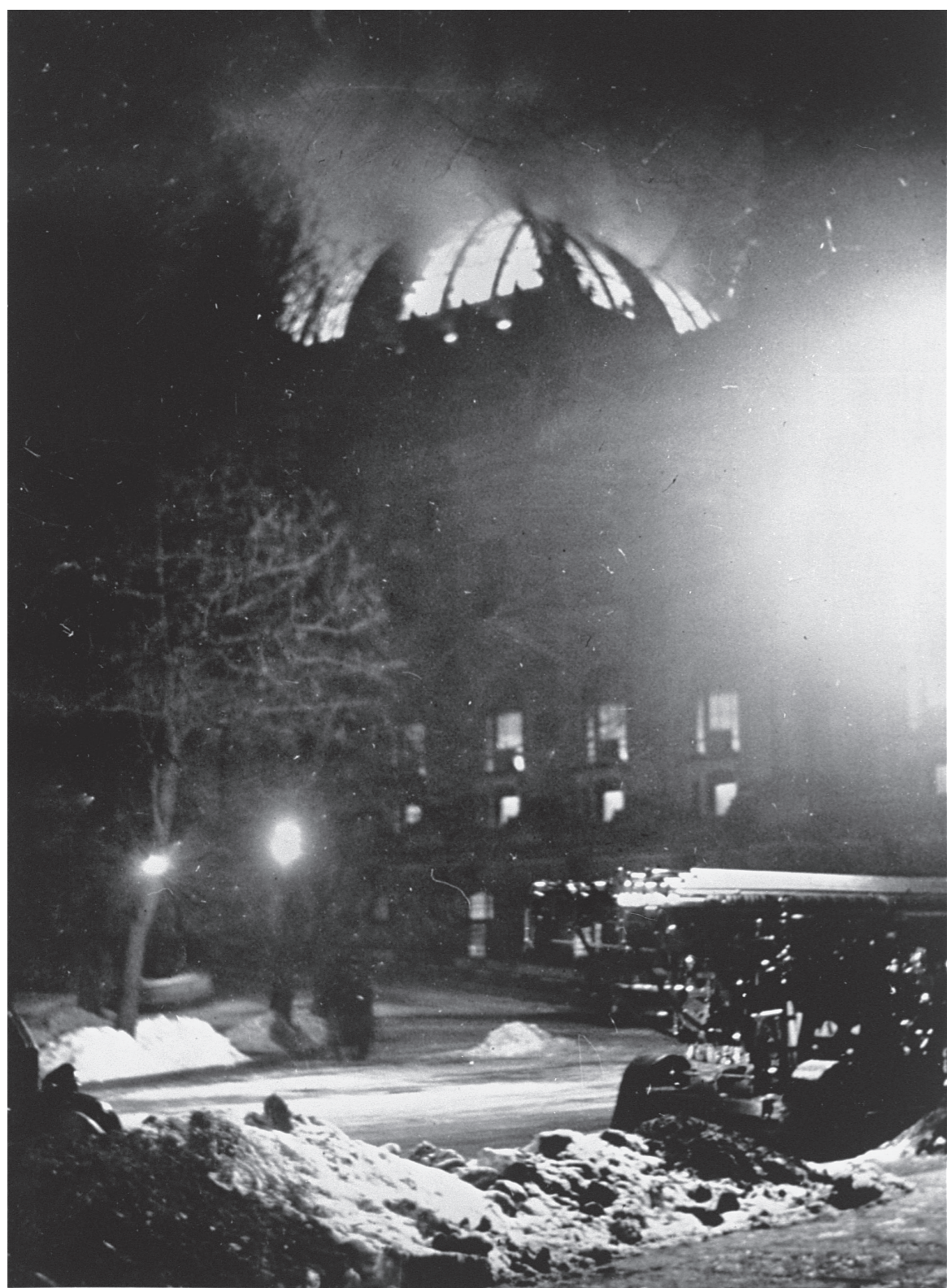
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# THE NAZI RISE TO POWER

The Nazi Party never obtained a majority of votes in a German national election and did not seize power in a violent coup. Instead, Nazi leaders used existing laws and constitutional provisions to establish a dictatorship with the appearance of legitimacy.

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TEst size German Chancellor Adolf Hitler (left) greets President Paul von Hindenburg during a ceremony in Potsdam, Germany, on March 21, 1933.  
*National Archives and Records Administration*



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The German Parliament (Reichstag) building in Berlin burns after an arson attack on February 27, 1933. Hitler blamed the Communist Party for the arson.  
*National Archives and Records Administration*



Reichspräsident von Hindenburg und Reichskanzler Adolf Hitler begrüßen sich am 21. 3. 33 in Potsdam.

On January 30, 1933, President Paul von Hindenburg appointed Adolf Hitler chancellor of Germany. Four weeks later, following an arson attack on the German Parliament (Reichstag) building, the Nazis and their allies exploited widespread fears of a Communist uprising to issue an **emergency decree** suspending constitutional protections for individual liberties and due process of law. Above all, police authorities, unhindered by judicial or administrative constraints, targeted political opponents of the Nazi state, especially Communists, Socialists, and trade unionists.

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# BUILDING THE NATIONAL COMMUNITY

A cornerstone of Nazi ideology, the National Community (Volksgemeinschaft) envisioned a “racial union” of all Germans that transcended class, religious, and regional differences.

Germans give the Nazi salute in Nuremberg on September 8, 1938. *US Holocaust Memorial Museum*



The Nazis relied on rallies, the media, popular culture, and social organizations, such as the Hitler Youth, to unify those it had identified as belonging to this new society. At the same time, **Nazi propaganda** excluded “racial enemies” (Jews, Slavs, Roma [Gypsies], and people with disabilities) and non-conformists (including political opponents, gay men, and Jehovah’s Witnesses) from the nation.

(Right) German soldiers swear the oath of loyalty to Hitler in January 1938. *US Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Karl Neumann*



After Hitler declared himself “Führer and Reich Chancellor of Germany” in August 1934, all public officials and soldiers swore an **oath of loyalty** and obedience to him as a symbol of the German nation.

This propaganda poster features Adolf Hitler and the national motto, “One people, one nation, one leader!” *US Holocaust Memorial Museum*

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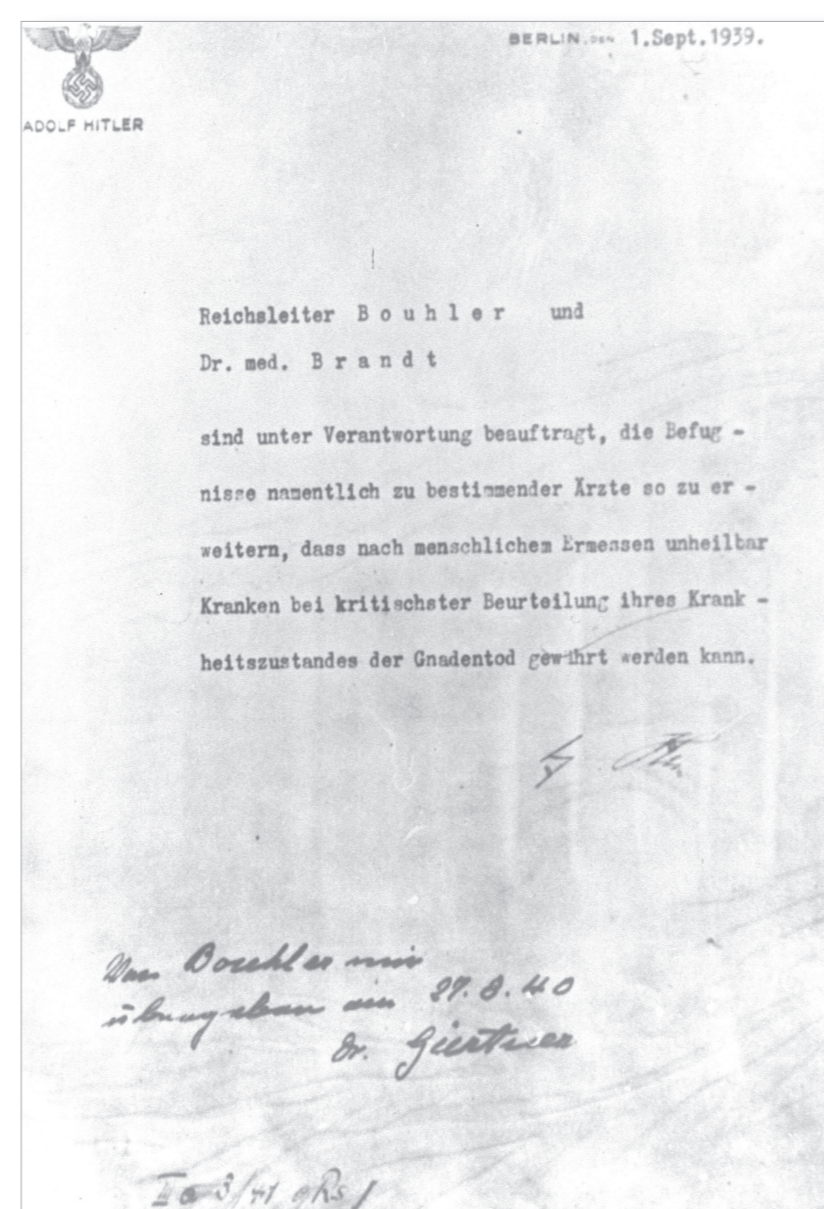
# THE “SCIENCE” OF RACE

“Racial science” classified not only physical characteristics and appearance, but also alleged intellectual capacity and behavior to establish a hierarchy of “superior” and “inferior” people. The Nazis fused their ideology with this “science” of race to justify discrimination, persecution, and murder.



The Nazis promoted a nationalism that combined territorial expansion with antisemitism and claims of biological superiority for the “**Aryan master race.**” Echoing pre-existing eugenic fears, the Nazis aimed to promote births among healthy “Germans” and sought to reduce or eliminate births among those they held to be inferior or a racial threat. To this end, Nazi leaders announced the Nuremberg Laws in 1935, which defined Jews as non-German and criminalized sexual relations between the two groups. Antisemitic legislation further excluded Jews in Germany from all areas of public life.

“Races of the Earth. Non-European Races.” “Racial science” used charts like this one from 1933 to identify a “hierarchy” of racial types. *US Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Bezirk Unterfranken Hauptverwaltung*



## “EUTHANASIA” KILLING PROGRAM

Hitler’s authorization for the “euthanasia” killing program permitted the murder by health care professionals of at least 200,000 Germans with physical and mental disabilities. This text (left) from fall 1939 reads: “Reich Leader Bouhler and Dr. med. [Karl] Brandt are charged with responsibility to extend the powers of specific doctors in such a way that, after the most careful assessment of their condition, those suffering from illnesses deemed to be incurable may be granted a mercy death. [signed] Adolf Hitler.” *National Archives and Records Administration*



Helene Melanie Lebel (pictured here) was diagnosed with schizophrenia at age 19. Her parents received notice in August 1940 that Helene had been transferred from Vienna to an institution in Germany. Helene was murdered at the Brandenburg “euthanasia” facility using poison gas. Official records listed a falsified cause of death. *US Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Marion Davy*

# NO HELP, NO HAVEN

On the morning after Kristallnacht, local residents of a small town watch as the synagogue is destroyed by fire. Ober-Ramstadt, Germany, November 10, 1938. *US Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Trudy Isenberg*

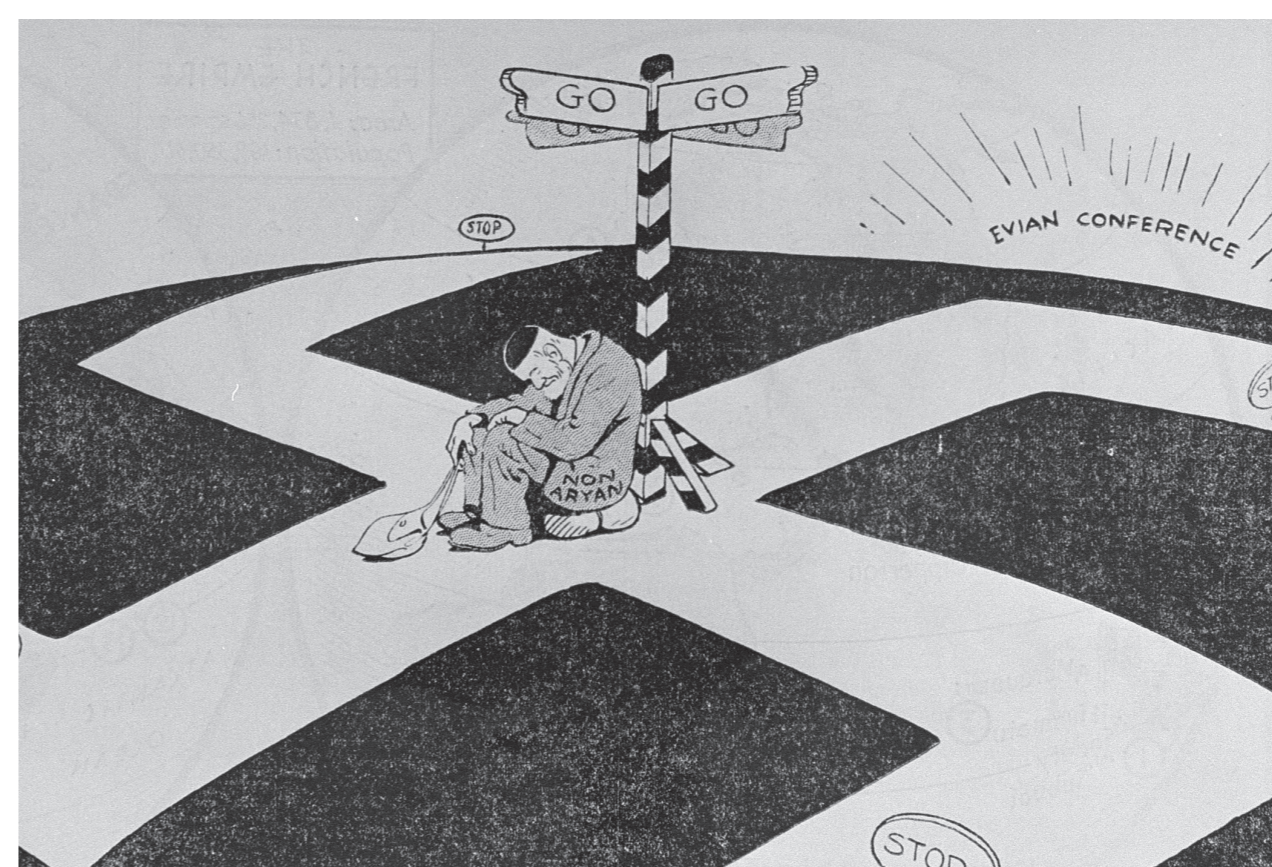


Passengers on the deck of the refugee ship *St. Louis*. *US Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Betty Troper Yaeger*

In May 1939, the transatlantic liner *St. Louis* sailed to Cuba with more than 900 Jewish refugees (pictured) from Nazi Germany. Denied entry into Cuba and turned away by the United States, the ship returned to Europe in June. The refugees were admitted by Belgium, France, Great Britain, and the Netherlands, but about one in four was killed in the Holocaust.

Persecuted at home and unwelcome abroad, Jews in Germany faced an uncertain future.

As persecution of the Jewish population mounted, some sought to leave. However, bureaucratic hurdles within Germany and the reluctance of many countries to accept large numbers of Jewish refugees often prevented them from emigrating. At the **Evian Conference** in July 1938, world leaders from more than 30 countries met to discuss the plight of Jewish refugees, but only the Dominican Republic agreed to accommodate more Jewish immigrants than existing quotas permitted. Beginning in spring 1938, persecution of and violence toward Jews in Germany escalated dramatically. On November 9–10, 1938, the Nazis, some dressed in civilian clothing, unleashed a wave of riots against the Jews of Germany and Austria, known as the “Night of Broken Glass” (**Kristallnacht**). They destroyed more than 250 synagogues and 7,000 Jewish-owned businesses, homes, and schools. The police arrested and detained as many as 30,000 Jewish men.



This political cartoon by Sidney “George” Strube titled “Will the Evian Conference Guide Him to Freedom?” appeared in the *New York Times* on Sunday, July 3, 1938.

# WORLD WAR II BEGINS

Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, starting World War II. As German forces advanced across Poland, they unleashed a wave of brutality against civilians.

SS soldiers lead Polish women to a shooting site in the Palmiry forest near Warsaw, Poland, in late 1939. *Library of Congress*



Following the rapid defeat of the Polish Army, German occupation authorities instituted a reign of terror, subjugating Poles and isolating Jews in designated areas of cities, often enclosed, known as **ghettos**. There, Jews suffered from starvation, overcrowding, and disease.

At the start of World War II, Germany and its Axis partners quickly overran much of Europe. In late 1941 and 1942, Soviet resistance stalled German advances in the Soviet Union. *US Holocaust Memorial Museum*



Jewish pedestrians cross a bridge that connected two parts of the Łódź ghetto in German-occupied Poland in 1941. The street below remained outside the ghetto.

*Bundesarchiv Bild 101/133/703/20*



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# CONCENTRATION CAMPS

Concentration camps were places of detention without judicial oversight.

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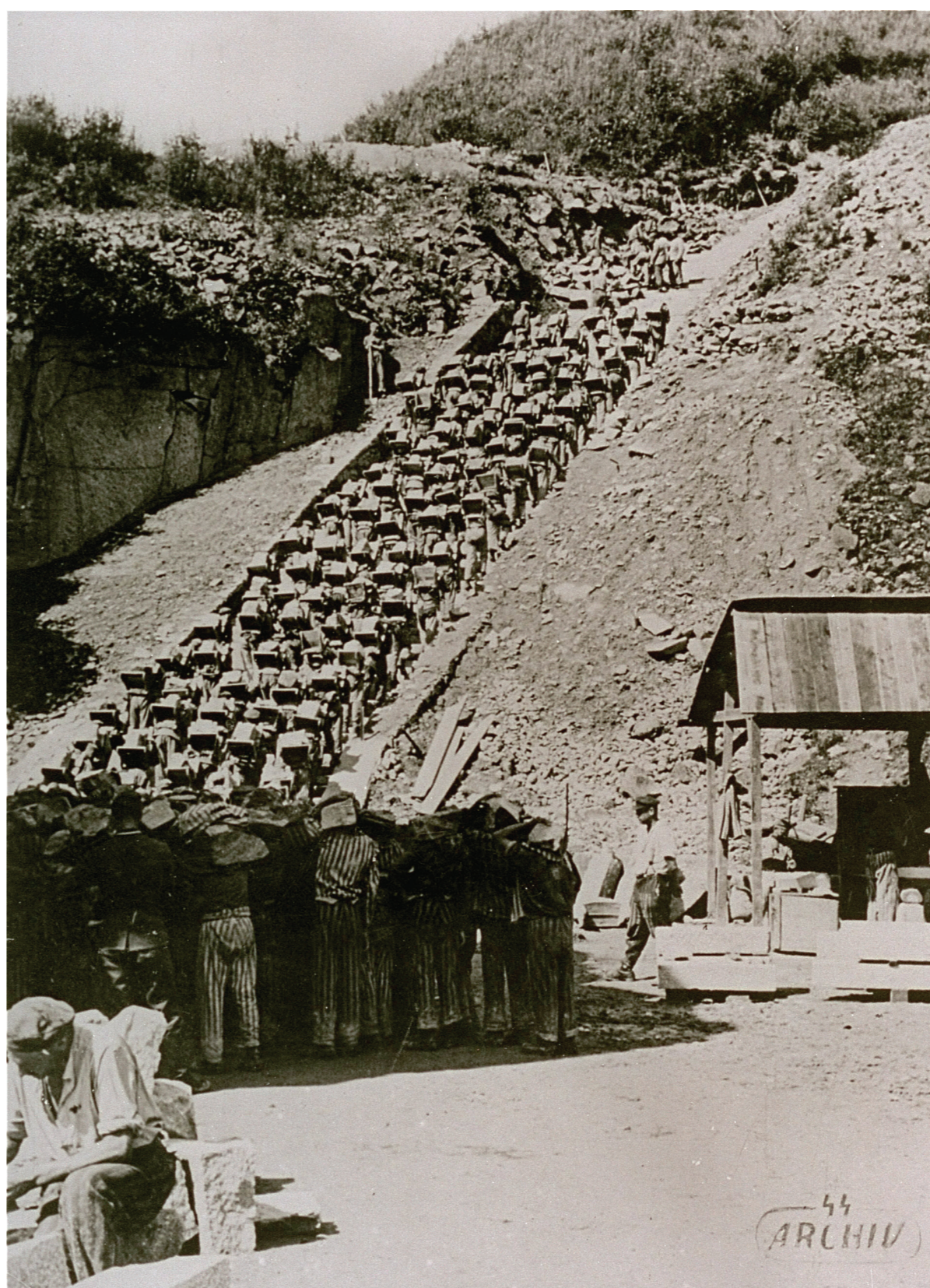
Prisoners stand for roll call at Buchenwald concentration camp in Germany. *US Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Robert A. Schmuhl*



(Above) Barracks at Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1944. *Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau Oświęcimiu*

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(Right) Prisoners carry large stones, each weighing more than 75 pounds, up the “staircase of death” at the Mauthausen concentration camp quarry in Austria in 1942. *Gedenkstätte Mauthausen*



The Nazis first established concentration camps to persecute political opponents as early as 1933. During World War II, the camp system expanded, targeting millions of supposed “enemies” of the Nazi regime. A central feature of these camps was **forced labor**, imposed without proper equipment, clothing, nourishment, or rest. Even when workers were needed, guards mistreated, starved, and killed hundreds of thousands of prisoners. Many more died from overwork, disease, and exposure.

# MOBILE KILLING UNITS

Mobile killing units consisted primarily of German SS and police forces tasked with killing Jewish civilians and other supposed “enemies” during the German invasion of the Soviet Union.

On June 22, 1941, Germany invaded the Soviet Union, unleashing a war of annihilation. Nazi propaganda promoted the eastern campaign as a racially motivated “war of survival” for Germany against “inferior” Slavs and so-called Asiatics, and especially Jews. Mobile killing units, both those of the SS and police and those of the German Army, **killed entire Jewish communities**, primarily through mass shootings. Supported by locally recruited auxiliaries, these forces directly killed more than 1.5 million people in the occupied Soviet Union during 1941 and 1942 alone. The majority were unarmed Jewish men, women, and children.

Members of German Police Battalion 101 guard some 600 Jews on a sports field. They shot the Jews later that day. Łomża, Poland, August 18, 1942. *US Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Staatsanwalt beim Landgericht Hamburg*



A portrait of an extended Jewish family. Vilna, Poland, circa 1938. German mobile killing squads massacred tens of thousands of Jews from Vilna and the surrounding area. *US Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Mina Katz Herman*



A member of a mobile killing unit prepares to shoot a Ukrainian Jewish man at the edge of a mass grave. *US Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Sharon Paquette*

## JEWIS OF EUROPE

In 1933, more than nine million Jews lived in Europe, with the majority residing in Poland and the western Soviet Union. By 1945, two out of every three would be dead, ending a rich and diverse Jewish culture that had existed in Europe for more than a thousand years.



# THE “FINAL SOLUTION”

German authorities euphemistically called the systematic, state-sponsored, bureaucratic murder of European Jews the “Final Solution.”

Hungarian Jews undergo a selection at the Auschwitz-Birkenau killing center in May 1944. *Yad Vashem*

In addition to shooting operations, the SS and police leadership established killing centers—facilities that used poison gas—in German-occupied Poland to murder Jewish civilians. German authorities relied on rail networks to deport Jewish men, women, and children from their homes across Europe to these **killing centers**. At Auschwitz-Birkenau, the largest of these facilities, most people were murdered soon after they arrived, with just a small minority selected for forced labor. In all, about 2,850,000 Jews perished in the killing centers.



This railcar, on display at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, is of the type used to deport Jews to killing centers in German-occupied Poland during the Holocaust. *US Holocaust Memorial Museum, gift of the Instytut Pamięci Narodowej*



(Above) Hungarian Jewish brothers Israel and Zelig Jacob, ages 9 and 11, both perished shortly after their arrival at Auschwitz-Birkenau in May 1944. *Yad Vashem*

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These shoes were confiscated from victims and are shown here on display at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC. *US Holocaust Memorial Museum; shoes on loan from Państwowe Muzeum na Majdanku*

**We are the shoes,** we are the last witnesses.  
We are shoes from grandchildren and grandfathers,  
From Prague, Paris, and Amsterdam,  
And because we are only made of fabric and leather  
And not of blood and flesh, each one of us has  
avoided the hellfire.

—from Moses (Moishe) Schulstein’s poem  
“I Saw a Mountain”

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# RESISTANCE AND RESCUE

Persecution and mass murder fueled resistance and rescue efforts across German-occupied Europe.

Organized armed resistance was the most forceful form of opposition to the Germans; Jewish civilians engaged in armed resistance in more than a hundred ghettos. In April 1943, Jewish underground fighters delayed the destruction of the Warsaw ghetto by nearly a month in an armed uprising. Even after SS and police units brutally suppressed the uprising, accounts of events there survived. Jewish leaders kept a secret archive of writings related to ghetto life, known as the **Oneg Shabbat Archive**. They hid the archive in several milk cans and metal boxes, most of which were recovered after the war. Rescue was vital for the survival of those few Jews who had escaped German efforts to annihilate them. After its establishment in January 1944, the United States **War Refugee Board** conducted aid operations and assisted in rescuing thousands of Jews in German-occupied Europe. Nevertheless, the Board's executive director, John Pehle, described its work as "too little and too late."



This milk can, which housed part of the Oneg Shabbat Archive, was recovered after the war. *US Holocaust Memorial Museum; milk can on loan from Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, Warsaw*

Portrait of Raoul Wallenberg. Funded in large part by the War Refugee Board, Wallenberg was a key figure in a broad network of rescue workers who contributed to the survival of more than 100,000 Jews in Budapest, Hungary, in 1944. *Sofia Persson/Nationalmuseum Sweden*



Jewish civilians surrender to German SS and police forces during the Warsaw ghetto uprising in Poland, April–May 1943. *National Archives and Records Administration*



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# LIBERATION

“The things I saw beggar description... The visual evidence and the verbal testimony of starvation, cruelty and bestiality were... overpowering... I made the visit deliberately, in order to be in a position to give **first-hand evidence** of these things if ever, in the future, there develops a tendency to charge these allegations merely to ‘propaganda.’”

– General Dwight D. Eisenhower, cable to General George C. Marshall, April 15, 1945, after visiting the recently liberated Ohrdruf concentration camp



Allied and Soviet forces defeated Nazi Germany in spring 1945, liberating hundreds of thousands of survivors from concentration camps and uncovering countless Nazi crimes.

Survivors faced an uncertain future as they began the slow task of recovering their health and rebuilding shattered lives. After liberation, many survivors were unwilling or unable to return to their homes. From 1945 to 1952, more than 250,000 **Jewish displaced persons** (DPs) lived in camps administered by Allied authorities and the United Nations. Most of these DPs eventually immigrated to other countries—especially the United States and Israel (after it was founded in 1948) to begin new lives.

(Above) US soldiers examine the remains of victims at the Ohrdruf concentration camp in Germany in April 1945. *National Archives and Records Administration*

(Right) A Holocaust survivor drinks from a metal bowl shortly after his liberation from the Buchenwald concentration camp in Germany in 1945. *National Archives and Records Administration*



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# JUSTICE AFTER THE HOLOCAUST

In the aftermath of World War II, beginning with the International Military Tribunal (IMT) at Nuremberg, Germany, the Western Allies and the Soviet Union prosecuted those responsible for Nazi crimes.



Defendants listen to the proceedings of the IMT in Nuremberg, Germany, in 1945–46. *National Archives and Records Administration*



US Army staffers organize thousands of captured German documents as evidence for the IMT in Nuremberg, Germany, in 1945–46. *National Archives and Records Administration*

In November 1945, the Allies established the IMT in Nuremberg to try major Nazi offenders. In proceedings known as the Nuremberg Trials, the IMT prosecuted 22 high-ranking officials representing a cross section of Nazi diplomatic, economic, political, and military leadership. Evidence submitted at the trial included materials relating to the Holocaust, which the IMT classified as “crimes against humanity.” Twelve of the defendants were sentenced to death. The IMT sentenced seven defendants to prison terms ranging from ten years to life and acquitted the remaining three defendants. The Nuremberg Trials set an important precedent for future prosecution of **crimes against humanity** and genocide under international law. In subsequent trials, US military tribunals prosecuted more than 180 high-ranking Nazi officials under the auspices of the IMT. Numerous other Nazi offenders were tried by authorities in the countries where the crimes were committed. Many perpetrators, however, were never brought to trial or punished.

First they came for the socialists,  
and I did not speak out—  
because I was not a socialist.

Then they came for the trade unionists,  
and I did not speak out—  
because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Jews,  
and I did not speak out—  
because I was not a Jew.

**Then they came for me—**  
and there was no one left to speak for me.

—Martin Niemöller (1892–1984),

a pastor in the Lutheran Confessing Church  
and early supporter of the Nazis, who was later  
imprisoned for opposing Nazi rule in Germany

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