

CLASS SET—PLEASE DO NOT WRITE ON THIS HANDOUT

INTRODUCTION TO THE HOLOCAUST

The Holocaust was the systematic, bureaucratic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of approximately six million Jews by the Nazi regime and its collaborators. "Holocaust" is a word of Greek origin meaning "sacrifice by fire." The Nazis, who came to power in Germany in January 1933, believed that Germans were "racially superior" and that the Jews, deemed "inferior," were an alien threat to the so-called German racial community.

During the era of the Holocaust, German authorities also targeted other groups because of their perceived "racial inferiority": [Roma](#) (Gypsies), the disabled, and some of the Slavic peoples ([Poles](#), Russians, and others). Other groups were persecuted on political, ideological, and behavioral grounds, among them Communists, Socialists, [Jehovah's Witnesses](#), and [homosexuals](#).

WHAT WAS THE HOLOCAUST?

In 1933, the [Jewish population of Europe](#) stood at over nine million. Most European Jews lived in countries that Nazi Germany would occupy or influence during [World War II](#). By 1945, the Germans and their [collaborators](#) killed nearly two out of every three European Jews as part of the "[Final Solution](#)," the Nazi policy to murder the Jews of Europe. Although Jews, whom the Nazis deemed a priority danger to Germany, were the primary victims of Nazi racism, other victims included some 200,000 Roma (Gypsies). At least 200,000 mentally or physically disabled patients, mainly Germans, living in institutional settings, were murdered in the so-called [Euthanasia Program](#).

As Nazi tyranny spread across Europe, the Germans and their collaborators persecuted and murdered millions of other people. Between two and three million [Soviet prisoners of war](#) were murdered or died of starvation, disease, neglect, or maltreatment. The Germans targeted the non-Jewish Polish intelligentsia for killing, and deported millions of Polish and Soviet civilians for [forced labor](#) in Germany or in occupied [Poland](#), where these individuals worked and often died under deplorable conditions. From the earliest years of the Nazi regime, German

authorities persecuted homosexuals and others whose behavior did not match prescribed social norms. German police officials targeted thousands of political opponents (including Communists, Socialists, and trade unionists) and religious dissidents (such as Jehovah's Witnesses). Many of these individuals died as a result of incarceration and maltreatment.

FORCED LABOR: AN OVERVIEW

The Nazis subjected millions of people (both Jews and other victim groups) to [forced labor](#) under brutal conditions. From the establishment of the first Nazi concentration [camps](#) and detention facilities in the winter of 1933, forced labor—often pointless and humiliating, and imposed without proper equipment, clothing, nourishment, or rest—formed a core part of the concentration camp regimen.

Even before the war began, the Nazis imposed forced labor on Jewish civilians, both inside and outside concentration camps. As early as 1937, the Nazis increasingly exploited the forced labor of so-called "enemies of the state" for economic gain and to meet desperate labor shortages. By the end of that year, most Jewish males residing in Germany were required to perform forced labor for various government agencies.

When Germany conquered Poland in the autumn of 1939 and established the General government, the German occupation authorities required all Jewish and Polish males to perform unpaid forced labor. The German authorities required Polish Jews to live in [ghettos](#) and deployed them at forced labor, much of it manual. For example, in the [Lodz ghetto](#), German state and private entrepreneurs established 96 plants and factories that produced goods for the German war effort. Forced-labor practices escalated in the spring of 1942, following changes in the administration of concentration camps.

For Jews, the ability to work often meant the potential to survive after the Nazis began to implement the ["Final Solution,"](#) the plan to murder all of European Jewry. Jews deemed physically unable to work were often the first to be shot or deported.

The Nazis also pursued a conscious policy of "annihilation through work," under which certain categories of prisoners were literally worked to death; in this policy, camp prisoners were forced to work under conditions that would directly and deliberately lead to illness, injury, and

death. For example, at the [Mauthausen](#) concentration camp, emaciated prisoners were forced to run up 186 steps out of a stone quarry while carrying heavy boulders.

Following the German [invasion of the Soviet Union](#) in June 1941, the Germans allowed millions of [Soviet prisoners of war](#) (POWs) to die through a deliberate policy of neglect (insufficient food, clothing, shelter, or medical care). However, in the spring of 1942, the German authorities also began to deploy Soviet POWs at forced labor in various war-related industries. From 1942–1944, the Germans deported nearly three million Soviet citizens to Germany, Austria, and [Bohemia-Moravia](#) as forced laborers.

At the end of the war, millions of non-German displaced persons were left in Germany, including some tens of thousands of Jews who had survived the "Final Solution," victims of Nazi policies of deportation for forced labor.

CONCENTRATION CAMP SYSTEM

German authorities under National Socialism established a variety of detention facilities to confine those whom they defined as political, ideological, or racial opponents of the regime. In time their extensive camp system came to include concentration camps, where persons were incarcerated without observation of the standard norms applying to arrest and custody; labor camps; prisoner of war camps; transit camps; and camps which served as killing centers, often called extermination camps or death camps.

In the earliest years of the Third Reich, various central, regional, and local authorities in Germany established concentration camps to detain political opponents of the regime, including German Communists, Socialists, trade unionists, and others from left and liberal political circles. In the spring of 1933, the SS established [Dachau](#) concentration camp, which came to serve as a model for an expanding and centralized concentration camp system under SS management.

WHO WAS INCARCERATED?

Individuals could be incarcerated in concentration camps indefinitely 1) without ever being

charged for a specific act; 2) after having been acquitted on charges relating to a specific crime; 3) upon release from prison after serving a sentence handed down by a German court for a specific act; 4) or because the SS and police authorities deemed that individual—often on the basis of alleged racial inferiority or alleged racially driven “hostility to Germany”—was a danger to German society.

After the SS leadership, with Hitler's blessing, detached the pre-Nazi police detective forces from state administrative and judicial oversight in the years 1933-1936, only the centralized SS and police authorities could determine who was a danger to the German “race” and order the incarceration of such persons in a concentration camp. For persons perceived to be political and racial opponents of the Reich, the Gestapo issued “protective custody” (Schutzhaft) orders, which authorized the incarceration in the camps of Jews, Social Democrats, Communists, liberals, Freemasons, Jehovah's Witnesses, clergy who opposed the Nazis, members of national opposition movements, non-Germans in general after Germany began to occupy Europe, and any others whose behavior—real or perceived—could be interpreted as politically motivated opposition.

For persons whose real or perceived behavior or actions were considered criminal but non-political in nature, or socially deviant so as to create a so-called danger to German society, the Criminal Police office issued “preventative arrest” (Vorbeugungshaft) orders. Under these orders, which were often motivated more by racial and social prejudice than by actual criminal violations, [Roma and Sinti \(Gypsies\)](#), so-called asocials, repeat criminal offenders, [homosexuals](#), and so-called security suspects were incarcerated in the concentration camps. Although the language of these arrest orders contained limits on the time during which a prisoner could be incarcerated, in practice incarcerations were routinely extended indefinitely. After [World War II](#) began, Himmler forbade in general the release of concentration camp prisoners for the duration of the war.

SOURCE OF FORCED LABOR

In addition to serving as detention centers for persons deemed to be of danger to the Reich, the concentration camp system served two other key purposes of the Nazi regime. First, corresponding to a close relationship between the Inspectorate of Concentration Camps and the

business and administrative offices of the SS, the camps were to be the source of inexpensive forced labor for SS-owned or operated businesses. After 1938 and well into World War II, concentration camp labor was deployed in producing construction materials for actual SS-managed construction projects (including the expansion of existing camps and the construction of new camps).

In exceptional cases, concentration camp prisoners were “leased” to private firms, such as the I.G. Farben synthetic fuel and rubber plants established in 1941 in Monowitz in Upper Silesia, near the [Auschwitz](#) concentration camp. After the incorporation of the camps into the WVHA in 1942, the SS increasingly engaged concentration camp prisoners in producing for the German war effort, deploying them, still under SS guard, to German state-owned firms and private firms, which compensated the SS for the increasingly scarce labor.

SYSTEMATIC MURDER

The concentration camps, standing outside the reach of the German justice authorities, had always been places where the SS could kill prisoners. After the beginning of the war, however, the camps increasingly became sites for the systematic murder of individuals or small groups of persons.

Such groups included: Soviet prisoners of war selected by Gestapo officials as particularly dangerous; members of national resistance groups; persons deemed by the Criminal Police (Kripo) to be particularly violent criminals; groups of partisans, real or perceived; [“Night and Fog”](#) prisoners from western Europe; Polish or Soviet civilian forced laborers in Germany, who were then alleged to have had sexual relations with German women or to have committed a violent crime; and recaptured US and British military officers, who had escaped from prisoner-of-war camps and were to be killed under the provisions of the so-called Bullet Decree of 1944. Such prisoners, like the European Jews who were murdered upon arrival in the gas chambers at the killing centers, were never officially registered as prisoners, but were killed usually within 24 hours of arrival. Recognizing the increasing numbers of these small-scale killing operations and because they needed an efficient way to kill prisoners who had become too weak to work, the SS authorities equipped several concentration camps with gas chambers during 1941-1942.

Even before the war, the camp system expanded with the construction of the major camps of [Sachsenhausen](#) (1936); [Buchenwald](#), near Weimar (1937); [Flossenbürg](#) and [Mauthausen](#) (1938); the women's concentration camp [Ravensbrück](#) (1939); [Auschwitz](#) (1940), which would later also serve as a killing center; and Natzweiler in Alsace (1941). As the need for prisoner labor increased, especially after the beginning of World War II, the SS authorities in these major camps established satellite camps. Buchenwald, for example, had 88 satellite camps, or subcamps, by the end of war in 1945. Some satellite camps, like [Gross-Rosen](#) and [Neuengamme](#), both subcamps of Sachsenhausen, grew so large that they became concentration camps in their own right.

EXPANDING PRISONER POPULATIONS

Most prisoners in the early concentration camps represented real or perceived political opponents of the regime. However, as time went on, the prisoner population expanded to include ideological and religious dissenters, such as [Jehovah's Witnesses](#) and dissident members of the clergy. The prisoner population also expanded to include individuals whose behavior did not comply with existing social norms, such as homosexuals, the “work-shy,” vagrants, other so-called “asocials,” and Roma, who, to Nazi leaders, represented at once an alien racial and criminal element on German soil. Habitual criminals were also incarcerated in concentration camps beginning in the 1930s, often after they had served their legitimate sentences in prison.

After the [Kristallnacht](#) (“Night of Crystal,” more commonly known as “Night of Broken Glass”) pogroms in November 1938, SS and police officials conducted mass arrests of adult male Jews and imprisoned them in camps such as Dachau, Buchenwald, and Sachsenhausen. The particularly brutal treatment of Jews in the concentration camps served as further impetus for German and Austrian Jews to emigrate.

The outbreak and expansion of war radically altered the makeup and composition of the concentration camp system. The camp population expanded dramatically with the arrival of foreign forced laborers, foreign political opponents and resistance fighters, and prisoners of war.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE "FINAL SOLUTION"

Before the general deportation of Jews out of the so-called Greater German Reich began in October 1941, the burgeoning prisoner population of many concentration camps on German soil inspired some of the initial prisoner selections. SS doctors and so-called euthanasia functionaries conducted these selections. Beginning in spring of 1941, German officials sent ill and exhausted prisoners from Dachau, Sachsenhausen, Buchenwald, Mauthausen, Flossenbürg, Gross-Rosen, Niederhagen, Neuengamme, Ravensbrück, and Auschwitz to their deaths at various [euthanasia](#) killing centers under the auspices of Operation 14f13, the extension of the so-called euthanasia program to the concentration camp system.

During World War II, Nazi doctors also performed [medical experiments](#) on prisoners in some camps. Experiments to test pharmaceuticals and medical treatments, formulate rescue and survival strategies for Axis troops in the field, devise efficient and economic methods of mass sterilization, and underpin Nazi racial and antisemitic theories claimed the health and lives of thousands of concentration camp prisoners.

One of the most significant events to alter the makeup of the concentration camp system was the decision to deport and systematically murder the European Jews. To facilitate this "[Final Solution](#)" (the physical annihilation of the Jews), SS and police officials established four [killing centers](#) in German-occupied Poland exclusively for this purpose: [Chelmno](#), [Belzec](#), [Sobibor](#), and [Treblinka](#). The SS and police staff at each of these camps used carbon monoxide gas to murder Jews in large numbers. The SS establishment also constructed one killing center in the concentration camp system. Auschwitz II, better known as Auschwitz-Birkenau, began killing operations in spring 1942. In Auschwitz-Birkenau, the SS had within the concentration camp system a killing center that had four gas chambers and that, at the height of the deportations, could kill up to 6,000 Jews each day.

In order to ensure an efficient flow of Jews from German-occupied countries, German officials and their collaborators established transit camps, such as [Westerbork](#) in the Netherlands, or Drancy in France, from which SS and police officials coordinated the deportation of French Jews and Jews on French soil, primarily to Auschwitz. In Auschwitz II, planners of the "Final Solution," aiming at greater efficiency, used the pesticide Zyklon B (prussic acid) to kill

prisoners by means of [gas](#). Beginning in 1941, SS authorities constructed gas chambers to kill smaller groups of prisoners as part of “routine” operations at Auschwitz I, [Lublin/Majdanek](#), Sachsenhausen, Mauthausen, and other concentration camps.

EVACUATIONS AND LIBERATION

As the Third Reich began to collapse, thousands of prisoners in German-occupied territories were sent on [forced marches](#) to the German interior in order to prevent the mass capture of prisoners by Allied forces. Surviving prisoners described these brutal ordeals as “death marches,” due to the high mortality rate and the ruthlessness with which the SS guards shot those unable to keep up. Due to both the forced marches and the collapse of supply shipments to the camps during the last winter of the war, the death count among prisoners from starvation, disease, and exposure increased dramatically. Historians estimate that nearly half of the more than 700,000 prisoners left in the concentration camp system in January 1945 had died by the end of May. Hundreds more died even after [liberation](#) because their bodies had sustained too much abuse to permit survival. In the last months of war, the discovery of the horrors of the German camp system by Allied units brought the staggering scope of Nazi atrocities to the attention of the world.

Scholars have estimated that the Nazi regime incarcerated hundreds of thousands, even millions of people in the concentration camp system between 1933 and 1945. It is difficult to estimate the total number of deaths. One estimate notes a range of between 795,889 and 955,215 deaths of registered prisoners, excluding the deaths of registered Jewish prisoners at Auschwitz and Lublin/Majdanek. If one counts the number of Jews (registered and unregistered) killed at Auschwitz (approximately one million) and at Lublin/Majdanek (at least 89,000), the number of deaths in the concentration camp system ranges between 1,885,889 and 2,045,215.

THE END OF THE HOLOCAUST

In the final months of the war, SS guards moved camp inmates by train or on forced marches, often called “[death marches](#),” in an attempt to prevent the Allied liberation of large numbers of prisoners. As Allied forces moved across Europe in a series of offensives against Germany, they began to encounter and [liberate](#) concentration camp prisoners, as well as prisoners en route by forced march from one camp to another. The marches continued until May 7, 1945, the day the

German armed forces surrendered unconditionally to the Allies. For the western Allies, World War II officially ended in Europe on the next day, May 8 (V-E Day), while Soviet forces announced their "Victory Day" on May 9, 1945.

In the [aftermath](#) of the Holocaust, many of the survivors found shelter in [displaced persons](#) (DP) camps administered by the Allied powers. Between 1948 and 1951, almost 700,000 Jews emigrated to Israel, including 136,000 Jewish displaced persons from Europe. Other Jewish DPs emigrated to the United States and other nations. The last DP camp closed in 1957. The crimes committed during the Holocaust devastated most European Jewish communities and eliminated hundreds of Jewish communities in occupied eastern Europe entirely.

Source: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. "The Holocaust." Holocaust Encyclopedia. <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005143>. Accessed on 2/28/2014.