

Teacher information sheet

The Holocaust



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Auschwitz-Birkenau – the largest Nazi death camp © Bill Hunt

Nazi persecution of Jews began in 1933 with oppressive laws and propaganda, enabling the systematic and planned attempt to annihilate European Jewry. From 1941 the 'Final Solution' was developed. The Nazis and their collaborators murdered six million Jewish people in ghettos, mass shootings, concentration camps and extermination camps. This became known as the Holocaust.

The Rise of the Nazi Party

The success of Hitler and the Nazi party did not come from nowhere. The party developed and established itself in a Germany devastated by defeat in World War One and suffering an economic crisis.

Antisemitism was present in societies across Europe, and there was a rise in pseudo-scientific ideas of eugenics and 'race theory'. Right-wing extremists blamed the country's defeat in World War One on a conspiracy between communists and Jews.

Nazi persecution of the Jews

Once the Nazis came to power they introduced laws that denied Jews many freedoms and restricted their rights. Boycotts of Jewish doctors, lawyers and shops began in 1933 and by 1935 Jews were not allowed to join the civil service or the army. The introduction of the Nuremberg laws in September 1935 meant Jews were banned from marrying non-Jews and their citizenship was removed, including their right to vote.



On 9 November 1938 the Nazis initiated attacks against the Jews. 91 Jews were murdered, 30,000 were arrested and sent to concentration camps and 267 synagogues were destroyed. This night became known as *Kristallnacht* – the 'Night of Broken Glass'. These attacks sparked debate in the House of Commons which led to Britain supporting the *Kindertransport* – a programme that rescued 10,000 children, the majority of whom were Jewish.

Ghettos

Nazi Germany invaded Poland on 1 September 1939 and as a result, the UK and France declared war. In spring 1940, the Nazis established ghettos – segregated parts of the larger towns and cities across Poland where Jews were forced to live. The largest ghetto was in Warsaw, where 400,000 Jews were crowded into 1.3 square miles of the city. Jews responded to the ghetto restrictions with a variety of resistance efforts. Hundreds of thousands of people died in the ghettos, from starvation, disease and executions carried out by the Nazis.



The 'Final Solution'

In 1941 the Nazis stepped up their persecution of the Jews through murder on an industrial scale. This began with mass shootings across eastern Europe, carried out by killing units called the *Einsatzgruppen* (task forces), after the Nazi invasion of the USSR in June 1941. By December 1941 over 1.5 million Jews had been killed by beatings, starvation or mass shootings.

The Wannsee Conference was held in Berlin on 20 January 1942 and was attended by high-ranking Nazis. Here they planned the mass-deportation of European Jews to extermination camps in German-occupied Poland, where they would be murdered. This 'Final Solution' aimed to exterminate all Jews in Europe. Deportation on this scale required organisation and coordination from collaborators across Europe.

The camps

The Nazis created more than 40,000 camps throughout German-occupied countries. There, inmates were subjected to slave labour, overcrowding, poor sanitary conditions, starvation and cruel treatment, with a high death rate. After initial attempts to commit mass murder through shootings proved 'inefficient', the Nazis extended the camp system to include six extermination camps, including Auschwitz-Birkenau. Their purpose was to carry out genocide using gas chambers.

Liberation

As Allied troops made progress across Nazi-occupied Europe, they discovered and liberated concentration and extermination camps. The camp of Majdanek in Poland was the first to be liberated, in the summer of 1944. On 8 May 1945, following the invasion of Germany and Hitler's suicide, Germany surrendered. Two thirds of Europe's Jews had been murdered.

Justice

Many senior Nazi war criminals were never sentenced for their roles during the Holocaust. After the war, the Allies brought 22 of the most senior Nazis to trial in Nuremberg, Germany between 1945 and 1946. The Nuremberg Trials were one of the most important innovations in the history of international law and helped lead to the establishment of the International Criminal Court over 50 years later, in 2002.

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