# What is Genocide?

**THE TERM "GENOCIDE"**

The term "genocide" did not exist before 1944. It is a very specific term, referring to violent crimes committed against groups with the intent to destroy the existence of the group. Human rights, as laid out in the US Bill of Rights or the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, concern the rights of individuals.

In 1944, a Polish-Jewish lawyer named Raphael Lemkin (1900-1959) sought to describe Nazi policies of systematic murder, including the destruction of the European Jews. He formed the word "genocide" by combining *geno*-, from the Greek word for race or tribe, with -*cide*, from the Latin word for killing. In proposing this new term, Lemkin had in mind "a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves." The next year, the International Military Tribunal held at Nuremberg, Germany, charged top Nazis with "crimes against humanity." The word “genocide” was included in the indictment, but as a descriptive, not legal, term.

**THE CRIME OF GENOCIDE**

On December 9, 1948, in the shadow of the Holocaust and in no small part due to the tireless efforts of Lemkin himself, the United Nations approved the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. This convention establishes "genocide” as an international crime, which signatory nations “undertake to prevent and punish.” It defines genocide as:

*[G]enocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:
(a) Killing members of the group;
(b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
(c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
(d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
(e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.*

While many cases of group-targeted violence have occurred throughout history and even since the Convention came into effect, the legal and international development of the term is concentrated into two distinct historical periods: the time from the coining of the term until its acceptance as international law (1944-1948) and the time of its activation with the establishment of international criminal tribunals to prosecute the crime of genocide (1991-1998). Preventing genocide, the other major obligation of the convention, remains a challenge that nations and individuals continue to face.

**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.

**ADMINISTRATION OF THE "FINAL SOLUTION"**

In the early years of the Nazi regime, the National Socialist government established concentration camps to detain real and imagined political and ideological opponents. Increasingly in the years before the outbreak of war, SS and police officials incarcerated Jews, Roma, and other victims of ethnic and racial hatred in these camps. To concentrate and monitor the Jewish population as well as to facilitate later deportation of the Jews, the Germans and their collaborators created ghettos, transit camps, and forced-labor camps for Jews during the war years. The German authorities also established numerous forced-labor camps, both in the so-called Greater German Reich and in German-occupied territory, for non-Jews whose labor the Germans sought to exploit.

Following the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, Einsatzgruppen (mobile killing units) and, later, militarized battalions of Order Police officials, moved behind German lines to carry out mass-murder operations against Jews, Roma, and Soviet state and Communist Party officials. German SS and police units, supported by units of the Wehrmacht and the Waffen SS, murdered more than a million Jewish men, women, and children, and hundreds of thousands of others. Between 1941 and 1944, Nazi German authorities deported millions of Jews from Germany, from occupied territories, and from the countries of many of its Axis allies to ghettos and to killing centers, often called extermination camps, where they were murdered in specially developed gassing facilities.

**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.

# "Final Solution": Overview

The Nazis frequently used euphemistic language to disguise the true nature of their crimes. They used the term “Final Solution” to refer to their plan to annihilate the Jewish people. It is not known when the leaders of Nazi Germany definitively decided to implement the "Final Solution." The genocide, or mass destruction, of the Jews was the culmination of a decade of increasingly severe discriminatory measures.

Under the rule of Adolf Hitler, the persecution and segregation of Jews was implemented in stages. After the Nazi party achieved power in Germany in 1933, its state-sponsored racism led to anti-Jewish legislation, economic boycotts, and the violence of the *Kristallnacht*("Night of Broken Glass") pogroms, all of which aimed to systematically isolate Jews from society and drive them out of the country.

**ANTI-JEWISH POLICY ESCALATES**

After the September 1939 German invasion of Poland (the beginning of World War II), anti-Jewish policy escalated to the imprisonment and eventual murder of European Jewry. The Nazis first established ghettos (enclosed areas designed to isolate and control the Jews) in the Generalgouvernement (a territory in central and eastern Poland overseen by a German civilian government) and the Warthegau (an area of western Poland annexed to Germany). Polish and western European Jews were deported to these ghettos where they lived in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions with inadequate food.

**MASSIVE KILLING OPERATIONS BEGIN**

After the June 1941 German invasion of the Soviet Union, SS and police units (acting as mobile killing units) began massive killing operations aimed at entire Jewish communities. By autumn 1941, the SS and police introduced mobile gas vans. These paneled trucks had exhaust pipes reconfigured to pump poisonous carbon monoxide gas into sealed spaces, killing those locked within. They were designed to complement ongoing shooting operations.

On July 17, 1941, four weeks after the invasion of the Soviet Union, Hitler tasked SS chief Heinrich Himmler with responsibility for all security matters in the occupied Soviet Union. Hitler gave Himmler broad authority to physically eliminate any perceived threats to permanent German rule. Two weeks later, on July 31, 1941, Nazi leader Hermann Goering authorized SS General Reinhard Heydrich to make preparations for the implementation of a "complete solution of the Jewish question."

**KILLING CENTERS**

In the autumn of 1941, SS chief Heinrich Himmler assigned German General Odilo Globocnik (SS and police leader for the Lublin District) with the implementation of a plan to systematically murder the Jews of the Generalgouvernement. The code name Operation Reinhard was eventually given to this plan, named after Heydrich (who was assassinated by Czech partisans in May 1942). As part of Operation Reinhard, Nazi leaders established three killing centers in Poland -- Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka -- with the sole purpose of the mass murder of Jews.

The Majdanek camp served from time to time as a killing site for Jews residing in the Generalgouvernement. In its gas chambers, the SS killed tens of thousands of Jews, primarily forced laborers too weak to work. The SS and police killed at least 152,000 people, mostly Jews, but also a few thousand Roma (Gypsies), in gas vans at the Chelmno killing center about thirty miles northwest of Lodz. In the spring of 1942, Himmler designated Auschwitz II (Auschwitz-Birkenau) as a killing facility. SS authorities murdered approximately one million Jews from various European countries at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

German SS and police murdered nearly 2,700,000 Jews in the killing centers either by asphyxiation with poison gas or by shooting. In its entirety, the "Final Solution" called for the murder of all European Jews by gassing, shooting, and other means. Approximately six million Jewish men, women, and children were killed during the Holocaust -- two-thirds of the Jews living in Europe before World War II.

# Nazi Camps

Between 1933 and 1945, Nazi Germany established about 20,000 camps to imprison its many millions of victims. These camps were used for a range of purposes including forced-labor camps, transit camps which served as temporary way stations, and extermination camps built primarily or exclusively for mass murder. From its rise to power in 1933, the Nazi regime built a series of detention facilities to imprison and eliminate so-called "enemies of the state." Most prisoners in the early concentration camps were German Communists, Socialists, Social Democrats, Roma (Gypsies), Jehovah's Witnesses, homosexuals, and persons accused of "asocial" or socially deviant behavior. These facilities were called “concentration camps” because those imprisoned there were physically “concentrated” in one location.

After Germany's annexation of Austria in March 1938, the Nazis arrested German and Austrian Jews and imprisoned them in the Dachau, Buchenwald, and Sachsenhausen concentration camps, all located in Germany. After the violent *Kristallnacht* ("Night of Broken Glass") pogroms in November 1938, the Nazis conducted mass arrests of adult male Jews and incarcerated them in camps for brief periods.

**FORCED-LABOR AND PRISONER-OF-WAR CAMPS**

Following the German invasion of Poland in September 1939, the Nazis opened forced-labor camps where thousands of prisoners died from exhaustion, starvation, and exposure. SS units guarded the camps. During World War II, the Nazi camp system expanded rapidly. In some camps, Nazi doctors performed medical experiments on prisoners.

Following the June 1941 German invasion of the Soviet Union, the Nazis increased the number of prisoner-of-war (POW) camps. Some new camps were built at existing concentration camp complexes (such as Auschwitz) in occupied Poland. The camp at Lublin, later known as Majdanek, was established in the autumn of 1941 as a POW camp and became a concentration camp in 1943. Thousands of Soviet POWs were shot or gassed there.

**KILLING CENTERS**

To facilitate the "Final Solution" (the genocide or mass destruction of the Jews), the Nazis established killing centers in Poland, the country with the largest Jewish population. The killing centers were designed for efficient mass murder. Chelmno, the first killing center, opened in December 1941. Jews and Roma were gassed in mobile gas vans there. In 1942, the Nazis opened the Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka killing centers to systematically murder the Jews of the Generalgouvernement (the territory in the interior of occupied Poland).

The Nazis constructed gas chambers (rooms that filled with poison gas to kill those inside) to increase killing efficiency and to make the process more impersonal for the perpetrators. At the Auschwitz camp complex, the Birkenau killing center had four gas chambers. During the height of deportations to the camp, up to 6,000 Jews were gassed there each day.

Jews in Nazi-occupied lands often were first deported to transit camps such as Westerbork in the Netherlands, or Drancy in France, en route to the killing centers in occupied Poland. The transit camps were usually the last stop before deportation to an extermination camp.

Millions of people were imprisoned and abused in the various types of Nazi camps. Under SS management, the Germans and their collaborators murdered more than three million Jews in the killing centers alone. Only a small fraction of those imprisoned in Nazi camps survived.

**Assignment:** On your own paper, or typed, write your response to these articles. What stands out to you? How do you feel? What questions do you have?

The above articles were obtained from the National Holocaust Museum Website, <http://www.ushmm.org>