

# HOLOCAUST HISTORY CORE CONTENT

## A Roadmap for Educators

### A. JEWISH LIFE IN EUROPE BEFORE NAZI RULE

- Jews are an ethno-religious people, whose identity is based on shared ancestry, culture, history, religion and peoplehood. Jews are not a biological race.
- Prior to the Holocaust, Jewish people had lived in every country in Europe for many centuries.
- They were a small minority in each country in which they lived.
- Jewish communities were deeply embedded in European societies, participating in political, intellectual, economic, and cultural life.
- Jewish communities across Europe were culturally rich and diverse.
- Jewish life varied by region, marked by differing languages, religious observance, levels of assimilation, urbanization, class and political and cultural traditions.
- This diversity shaped how persecution manifested locally.
- In Germany, Jews were a tiny minority of the population (less than 1%).
- The vast majority of Europe's Jews lived in Eastern Europe.

Big Idea: Jews were a long-established religious and cultural minority living in various ways across many countries in Europe. There was no single "Jewish experience," and the vast diversity of Jewish communities shaped how persecution unfolded in different places.

### B. HISTORIC ANTISEMITISM

- The Nazis did not invent antisemitism. Antisemitism has a long history in Europe and around the world.
- Antisemitism has forms and logics that are distinct from other types of prejudice or racism.
- Antisemitism operates through conspiracy narratives that portray Jews as secretly powerful, disloyal, and threatening nations and societies from within.
- These narratives are internally contradictory: Jews are imagined as both inferior and omnipotent; capitalist and communist.
- Antisemitism morphs and adapts, taking on new forms in response to changing political and social contexts in each era and society (shape shifting in nature)
- Jews served as the traditional scapegoat for many centuries in many European societies.

Big Idea: Antisemitism is a conspiracy-based, shape-shifting system of ideas that framed Jews as an internal enemy long before the Nazis came to power.

## C. INTERWAR YEARS AND THE RISE OF THE NAZIS (1918–1933)

- Social and political effects of World War I included defeat, revolution, instability, paramilitarism.
- The aftermath of World War I reshaped European politics and societies in ways that weakened democracy and enabled authoritarian movements.
- New democracies across Europe were political instability and fragile (especially Weimar Germany).
- Antisemitic conspiracy narratives were revived and radicalized in the interwar period by military leaders and politicians who sought to avoid blame for defeat in WWI.
- Treaty of Versailles was framed as humiliation and betrayal.
- Economic crises (inflation, unemployment, Great Depression) fuelled social anxiety and support for extremist solutions.
- Repeated communist uprisings and revolutionary unrest in Weimar Germany intensified fear of Bolshevism, and political violence and paramilitarism became normalised.
- The Nazis' role in violently suppressing left-wing uprisings positioned them as a force of order against communism in Germany
- Repeated use of emergency powers by President Hindenburg eroded democratic norms and normalised rule by decree.
- The Nazi Party gained mass support, but it never won a majority in elections; it simply became the largest party in a fragmented parliament.
- Hitler was appointed Chancellor in January 1933 by President Hindenburg through constitutional procedures.
- In appointing Hitler as Chancellor, Hindenburg and German conservative elites mistakenly believed they could control him and use his Nazi Party's popularity for their own purposes.
- The Reichstag Fire led to the passage of the Emergency Decree (February 1933) which suspended constitutional rights, civil liberties and enabled mass arrests of political opponents of the Nazis.
- The Enabling Act (March 1933) transferred legislative power from elected parliament to Hitler's cabinet, allowing laws to be passed without parliamentary approval.
- The collapse of democracy and the Nazis' rise to power occurred through legal and constitutional mechanisms, not revolution.

Big Idea: The Holocaust became possible within a post-war European context marked by democratic fragility, economic crisis, radical nationalism, fear of revolution and the erosion of legal norms.

## D. NAZI POWER IN GERMANY (1933–39)

### BUILDING DICTATORSHIP

- The Nazis built a dictatorship through law, propaganda, intimidation and institutions.
- The first victims of persecution under the Nazi dictatorship were political opponents (communists, socialist, trade unionists and other dissidents).
- The first concentration camps were established by the Nazis in 1933 for political opponents and only later were used to imprison Jews and other targeted groups.
- The Nazi forcibly aligned all media, institutions, professions and organisations with Nazi ideology by replacing them with Nazi-controlled bodies (*Gleichschaltung*)

### RACIAL IDEOLOGY BECOMES LAW

- Jews were defined as the central racial “enemy” within Nazi ideology.
- Early persecution was legal and administrative, stripping Jews of civil rights, excluding them from professions, schools, economic activity and public spaces and beginning in 1933.
- In April 1933, the Nazis organized a nationwide boycott of Jewish businesses, marking a shift from antisemitic rhetoric to coordinated public action. This also served as a test of social compliance and the normalization of exclusion by German society.
- The *Nuremberg Laws* (1935) – *Reich Citizenship Law* defined Jewish identity as a biological race rather than a religion and revoked full citizenship of Jews; *Law for the Protection of German Blood & Honour* prohibited marriage/intercourse between Jews & non-Jews.

### INSTITUTIONS, COMPLIANCE AND DIFFUSED RESPONSIBILITY

- Nazi power relied on legal and political institutions and widespread compliance by citizens.
- In this process, conformity, careerism, social pressure and obedience were more significant factors than a person’s ideological commitment to Nazism and antisemitism.
- Bureaucratic systems normalized discrimination and diffused responsibility across agencies.

### PROPAGANDA AND SOCIAL MOBILIZATION

- Nazi propaganda and media control normalized antisemitism and reinforced “us vs. them” thinking. Censorship silenced alternatives and aligned institutions with regime goals.
- Nazi state control of media, schools and culture facilitated indoctrination and spread of ideology.
- The Nazi concept of “national community” (*volksgemeinschaft*) promoted unity for some and excluded those defined as outsiders.

Turning Points: **1933** – the Nazis established authoritarian state power; **1935** – the Nuremberg Laws defined Jews as a separate race regardless of their religious affiliation and identification, establishing the legal framework for persecution.

Big Idea: Genocide became possible because the Nazi state transformed ordinary institutions into instruments of exclusion and control. Persecution was normalized through law, bureaucracy, propaganda, censorship, and the coordination of cultural and professional institutions.

## E. PERSECUTION OF THE JEWS BEFORE THE WAR (1933–39)

- Daily life for Jews changed through loss of civil rights, social isolation, exclusion from professions and schools, and economic marginalization.
- Racial antisemitism was embedded into law by the 1935 Nuremberg Laws which established the legal framework for Jewish persecution
- 1938 marked a watershed in the persecution of the Jews with the following events:
  - Anschluss with Austria (March 1938)
  - German territorial expansion and war preparation
  - Munich Agreement to annex Czechoslovakia and appeasement by UK (Sept 1938)
  - Polish Action (Oct 1938)
  - Registration of Jewish property (Apr-Jun 1938)
  - special Jewish identity cards and passports marked with "J" (July-Oct, 1938)
  - Forced name changes (adding Israel and Sarah) (Aug 1938)
  - Kristallnacht (Nov 1938); widespread, state-led violence against Jews in the Third Reich; 30,000 Jews sent to concentration camps, property destroyed
  - Expropriation of Jewish assets and property (Oct-Dec, 1938)
  - Atonement tax; Reich flight tax
- Jewish responses varied: efforts to emigrate, adaptation to exclusion, and attempts to preserve family and community life.
- Options for emigration limited due to closed borders and international indifference to the plight of Jewish refugees (Evian Conference, 1938; MS St Louis 1939)
- Sept 1941 - German Jews were ordered to wear the yellow star; this had been imposed on Polish Jews in 1939; Eastern Europe 1941; France, Netherlands & Belgium in 1942
- October 1941, the Nazis banned all Jewish emigration, trapping remaining Jews in Nazi-controlled Europe

Turning Point: 1938 – the transition from legal and social persecution of the Jews into open, state-directed terror and physical violence (culminating in Kristallnacht).

Big Idea: Between 1933 and 1939, the Nazi regime transformed their extreme racial antisemitic ideology into everyday persecution of Jews through escalating legal, social and economic exclusion which eventually culminated in open state-directed violence in 1938.

## F. WAR & OCCUPATION: GHETTO & EXPLOITATION (1939-1941)

- War transformed Nazi power. Territorial expansion brought new Jewish populations under Nazi rule with the invasion of Poland in 1939 and Benelux states and France in 1940

- War brought mass displacement across occupied Europe.
- Different occupation systems in East and West shaped how persecution unfolded
- In the East, occupation rule was through military authorities, not civil, which weakened restraints on violence
- In the West, occupation relied more on civilian administrations and existing state institutions (and cooperation or lack of cooperation by local civil service)
- In Eastern Europe, ghettos were created and functioned as:
  - tools of segregation and control
  - sites of starvation, disease, and forced labour
  - places of constrained Jewish agency and resistance
  - Jewish councils were forced to administer ghettos and implement Nazi orders under coercion, facing impossible moral choices (e.g., compiling deportation lists)
  - places where large numbers of Jews died (over 800,000 were killed through starvation, violence, and disease)
- In Western Europe, persecution followed a different pattern:
  - There were fewer ghettos in Western Europe; in most locations, Jews remained in their homes until call-up/arrest.
  - Persecution in Western Europe followed a pattern of registration, exclusion from public life, and confiscation of property.
  - Arrests and internment were carried out through police and local authorities.
  - The Nazis relied on existing bureaucracies and local collaboration to implement discriminatory measures and ultimately deport Jews to killing centres in the east.

Turning Point: 1939 – the outbreak of World War II and the Nazi conquest of Europe.

Big Idea: Nazi policy radicalized under wartime conditions and territorial expansion, as millions of Jews in Poland, Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, France and Denmark came under Nazi control. Persecution unfolded differently across Europe because it was shaped by different occupation systems, administrative structures, and levels of local collaboration and constraint.

## G. WAR: THE SHIFT TO MASS KILLING (1941–45)

- Mid-1941, Nazi policy radicalized toward continent-wide mass murder with the development of the 'Final Solution of the Jewish Question,' the Nazi leadership's plan to murder all Jews.
- This was not a single fixed blueprint, but an accelerating set of decisions made under wartime conditions, particularly in the East.

### 1941: MASS SHOOTINGS (“HOLOCAUST BY BULLETS”)

- Most European Jews lived in Eastern and Central Europe, especially Poland, the Soviet Union, Romania and Hungary, not in Germany.
- The Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union (Operation Barbarossa) on June 22, 1941 brought millions more Jews under Nazi control.
- The invasion allowed the Nazis to frame the war as a racial and existential struggle, legitimizing extreme violence against Jews and others (Jews seen as Bolsheviks and biological enemies)
- In Oct 1941, the Nazis banned Jewish emigration from the Third Reich. This marked the Nazis’ shift from a strategy of forced emigration to the plan for total physical annihilation of the Jews.
- Mobile killing units (Einsatzgruppen, with police battalions and Waffen-SS support) followed the Nazi invading forces into the former Soviet territories. These units carried out mass shootings of entire Jewish communities in the places where they lived.
- In some regions (Ukraine, Baltic states) mass shooting was the primary killing method, not gas.
- Refusal by members of the mobile killing units to participate in mass shootings was possible and would result in reassignment to other duties. They were not punished for refusal.
- Killing was face-to-face and often supported by local collaborators.
- Most mass murder during the Holocaust took place in occupied Eastern Europe (Poland, Ukraine, Belarus and the Baltic states).
- Nearly half of Jewish victims were not murdered in death camps. Millions were killed near the places they lived as a result of mass shooting, starvation and disease in ghettos and camps.
- The perceived psychological and logistical limits of face-to-face shooting contributed to the development of industrialized killing methods, including gas vans and the death camps.
- The construction of Nazi death camps began in Oct 1941 with Chelmno & Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Turning Point: **June 1941** Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union marked the transition from persecution and localised violence to continent-wide, systematic mass murder of the Jews.

Big Idea: From 1941 onward, Nazi antisemitic ideology was translated into continent-wide mass murder of European Jews through decentralized killing, bureaucratic coordination and wartime radicalization, most of it carried out in occupied Eastern Europe, often with local collaboration.

### 1942: DEPORTATIONS AND KILLING CENTRES (“FINAL SOLUTION”)

- Wannsee Conference (January 1942) - senior Nazi officials met to align ministries and coordinate deportations necessary to implement the “Final Solution to the Jewish Question” (their plan for the systematic mass murder of all Jews across Europe)

- 1942-1944 – deportations of Jews from across Europe (western, central, eastern, and southern) to the killing centres (death camps) located in occupied Poland.
- Six death camps were built in Poland in 1941-42 for the purpose of the industrialized mass murder of Jews (Chelmno, Auschwitz-Birkenau, Majdanek, Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka).
- Poison gas technologies and personnel already developed in the T4 program (mass murder of Germans with disabilities) were adapted and transferred to the death camps
- From 1942 onward, gas chambers became the central method of killing. Roma & Sinti and a smaller number of Poles and Soviet prisoners of war were also murdered by gas, though Jews were the primary targets of the killing centres (around 90%)

Turning Point: **1942** - the shift from decentralized shootings to purpose-built death camps for faster, industrialized and more concealed killing.

Big Idea: From 1942, a genocide was implemented on a continent-wide scale through coordinated deportations and industrialized death camps. This transformed mass murder into a bureaucratically managed system that relied on railways, civil servants, police forces, and professional expertise across Europe.

#### 1944–45: COLLAPSE AND END

- Late deportations of remaining Jewish populations continued even as Nazi defeat was imminent (e.g., Hungary and Rhodes in 1944).
- Forced death marches of surviving camp inmates were carried out as the Nazis evaluated the camps ahead of Allied advances. The death marches resulted in mass death from exposure, starvation, mobile violence and exhaustion.
- Liberation ended systematic killing but not suffering. Survivors experienced displacement, disease, continued death, homelessness, and lives shattered by immeasurable loss.
- By war's end, six million Jews had been murdered in the Holocaust, representing two-thirds of the Jewish population of Europe.
- Millions of victims from other targeted groups (people with disabilities, Roma & Sinti, Polish, Soviet PoWs, Black Germans, gay men, Jehovah's Witnesses, political opponents, so-called "asocials")

Turning Point: **summer 1944** - Allied and Soviet forces advanced and mass killing shifted from camps to forced evacuations and death marches.

Big Idea: The Holocaust unfolded in escalating stages and was shaped by war, geography, ideology, institutions and changing circumstances. It was not a single master plan conceived in 1933. Nazi genocidal policy persisted amid military collapse, producing further mass death and suffering even as defeat became inevitable.

## H. RESPONSES AND RESPONSIBILITY

- Jewish responses and resistance were possible but severely constrained by terror, surveillance and collective punishment.
- Jewish resistance took many forms: armed resistance, spiritual and cultural resistance, hiding identity and mutual aid. Daily survival strategies were often the most realistic form of agency.
- Responsibility was distributed across many roles and institutions: Nazi leadership, state bureaucracies, security forces, collaborators, ordinary citizens and foreign governments.
- Rescue occurred but was rare and constrained by risk, laws and social pressures. Compliance, non-intervention and indifference were far more common.
- Non-intervention was shaped not only by fear but also by material benefit from dispossession (jobs, housing, property), alongside indifference.
- By 1942, Allied governments had credible information that Jews were being systematically murdered, but their responses were limited by political priorities, immigration policy, military strategy and antisemitism.
- The Bermuda Conference (1943) between Britain and USA illustrates the Allied state-level choices not to prioritize the rescue of Europe's Jews.

Turning Point: 1942–43 – When credible information about mass murder reached Allied governments, inaction became a matter of policy choice rather than ignorance, clarifying the limits of international response and the distribution of responsibility beyond Nazi-controlled Europe.

Big Idea: The Holocaust depended on choices made and actions taken at many levels, not only by top Nazi leaders.

## I. AFTERMATH & LEGACY

- Hundreds of thousands of survivors spent years in Displaced Persons (DP) camps after liberation, unable to return home and barred from immigrating due to restrictive postwar immigration policies.
- Survivors faced displacement, loss, trauma, immigration and the challenge of rebuilding lives in unfamiliar societies.
- Hidden children often experienced long-term identity disruption after the war due to years of living under false identities and separation from families; reunification could be traumatic and complex.

- Canada maintained restrictive immigration policies for years after the Holocaust (1945 “none is too many” phrase uttered by Canadian immigration official); Jewish survivors were admitted in limited numbers until policies began to change in the late 1940 and early 1950s.
- The Holocaust caused enormous human and cultural loss; the consequences continue to shape communities, memory and the world today.
- Postwar justice was partial, uneven and constrained by Cold War politics, national interests and denial or minimization of local collaboration.
- Holocaust history reshaped international law and global moral frameworks.
  - Raphael Lemkin coined the term genocide in 1944
  - UN Genocide Convention (1948)
  - Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)
  - UN Refugee Convention (1951)

Turning Point: **1945-48**-marked a shift from mass violence to attempts at legal accountability and international norms, even as justice remained incomplete.

Big Idea: The Holocaust did not end neatly in 1945. Its aftermath extended far beyond 1945: survivors remained displaced for years, justice was uneven and borders remained largely closed. The Holocaust reshaped postwar Europe, and new international legal norms emerged.

## J. MEMORY, KNOWLEDGE, AND COMMEMORATION

- Widespread knowledge and commemoration did not exist immediately after 1945.
- Knowledge of the Holocaust has deepened and changed over time as new evidence, archives and scholarship have become available.
- Survivor testimony became central to historical understanding and memory, shaping education, trials and public reckoning over time.
- The Eichmann trial, the opening of archives, and the growing prominence of survivor testimony marked a shift from limited public awareness to sustained public memory and scholarly engagement with the Holocaust.
- Remembrance is constructed and shaped by evidence, politics, and culture.
- Historical understanding requires evidence, careful interpretation and attention to distortion, misinformation and denial.

Big Idea: Understanding the Holocaust depends on historical evidence and interpretation; memory and commemoration are shaped over time by politics and culture.