

# WHAT WAS THE HOLOCAUST?

**The Holocaust was the persecution and murder of six million Jews by Nazi Germany and its collaborators. It was an evolving and systematic process that unfolded across Europe and North Africa between 1933 and 1945.**

The **Nazi Party** came to power in Germany in 1933, forming a dictatorship under Adolf Hitler. From the outset, Nazi policies were based on an extreme **antisemitic** worldview. The Nazis claimed that Jews were an “inferior race” that would destroy the “**Aryan race**” if they were not eliminated. Guided by this ideology, the Nazis passed hundreds of laws to dehumanize, persecute and isolate Jews.

During the Second World War, Nazi persecution of Jews escalated into mass violence. Jews were forced into **ghettos** and later deported to labour camps, **concentration camps** and **death camps**. In 1941-2, Nazi leaders planned the “Final Solution”—their code name for the systematic, organized murder of every Jew in Europe. In Eastern Europe, entire Jewish communities were killed in mass shooting actions. These were carried out by Nazi death squads (Einsatzgruppen) and local collaborators. In ghettos and camps, Jews died by starvation, brutal treatment and disease. In the death camps, Jews were killed in gas chambers and through deadly medical experiments. This attempt to annihilate the entire Jewish population resulted in the deaths of two-thirds of all Jews in Europe. It was a **genocide**.

Roma and Sinti people were also victims of a genocide during this time because they were viewed by the Nazis as racially inferior. The Nazis and their collaborators killed an estimated 250,000 to 500,000 Roma and Sinti. Other groups targeted for persecution and murder by the Nazis included people with disabilities, men accused of homosexuality, Black Germans and so-called “asocials.” Political opponents, Polish and Soviet civilians, Soviet prisoners of war and Jehovah’s Witnesses were also among the targeted groups. By 1945, many millions from these groups had been murdered by the Nazis.

## GLOSSARY

**Nazi Party** – short for National Socialist German Workers’ Party. The Nazi Party was a far-right political party led by Adolf Hitler. It ruled as a dictatorship in Germany from 1933 to 1945 and promoted extreme nationalism, racism and radical antisemitism. The Nazis built their power around the idea of a “racially pure” German state.

**Antisemitism** – hatred or prejudice against Jewish people. Under the Nazis, antisemitism was a deeply hateful belief system that cast Jews as racial outsiders. This racial antisemitism combined centuries-old myths about Jews with new pseudo-scientific theories about biology and race. The Nazis spread conspiracy theories that Jews secretly controlled governments, banks, and the media. They claimed Jews were inherently dishonest, greedy, and disloyal. Above all, the Nazis taught that Jews were the greatest threat to the survival of the German nation.

**Aryan race** – Nazis used this term to describe what they claimed was a superior “master race” of people. According to the Nazis, “Aryans” were non-Jewish, white Europeans of German or Nordic background. The perfect “Aryan” was tall and athletic,

with light skin, blonde hair, blue eyes, and strong facial features. The Nazis used this concept to justify the persecution and destruction of so-called “inferior races.”

**Ghetto** – a section of a city where a group of people was forced to live under poor and crowded conditions. During World War II, the Nazis created ghettos and forced Jewish people into them, separating them from the rest of the population. Many ghettos were enclosed by walls or barbed wire so that people could not leave, and the flow of food, medicine, and goods was tightly controlled. Nearly one million Jews died in ghettos due to starvation, disease, and violence.

**Concentration camp** – The Nazis first set up concentration camps in 1933 to imprison political opponents, such as communists and socialists. Over time, they expanded the system to imprison Jews, Roma, Jehovah’s Witnesses, men accused of homosexuality and others. Life in concentration camps was cruel. People lived in filthy, crowded conditions, were forced to do back-breaking work and given little food. Many died because of starvation, disease or violence.

**Death camp** – camps built by the Nazis for the specific purpose of systematically murdering the Jews of Europe. They were constructed to murder as many human beings as quickly as possible, within hours of their arrival. None of the other camps had this explicit purpose. The Nazis established six death camps: Auschwitz-Birkenau, Belzec, Chełmno, Majdanek, Sobibor and Treblinka.

**Genocide** – According to the United Nations Genocide Convention, genocide is any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

- Killing members of the group;
- Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

For a detailed history these events visit our website *Fragments in Focus: A History of the Holocaust*.

[WWW.FRAGMENTSINFOCUS.CA](http://WWW.FRAGMENTSINFOCUS.CA)

# STUDENT ACTIVITY: DEFINITION OF THE HOLOCAUST

<b>1. When did the Holocaust take place?</b>	<b>2. Where did the Holocaust take place?</b>
<b>3. Who were the perpetrators of the Holocaust?</b>	<b>4. Who were the primary victims of the Holocaust?</b>
<b>5. Who else did the Nazis and their collaborators target?</b>	<b>6. What was the result of the Holocaust?</b>
<b>7. Why did the Holocaust occur?</b>	<b>8. How was the Holocaust carried out?</b>