The Holocaust, Part Two: The "Final Solution"

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A doctor stands at the center with Holocaust survivors at the entrance to the newly liberated Auschwitz concentration camp in 1945. Photo from: Fine Art Images/Heritage Images/Getty Images

The second in a two-part series

Adolf Hitler was the leader of the Nazi governmental party. He ruled Germany from 1933 to 1945. Hitler wanted to take over Europe and the rest of the world.

In 1940, the Germany army expanded Hitler's control over Europe. Nazi soldiers took over Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg and France. Beginning in 1941, Jews from all over the continent were sent to Poland. They were forced to live in restricted city sections called ghettos.

On July 31, 1941, one of Hitler's top commanders wrote of the need for a "final solution" to "the Jewish question." The Nazi leaders came up with a plan to kill the Jewish people. Beginning in late 1941, all Jews were forced to wear a yellow star. This made them open targets. Tens of thousands of Jews were soon sent to the Polish ghettos.
Around the same time, the Nazis were testing mass killing tactics. At the Auschwitz concentration camp, a prison camp where people were forced to work, Nazis killed 500 prisoners using poison gas. This was a disturbing sign of the coming Holocaust. The Nazis would use these and other ways to kill 6 million Jews.

**Germans sent Jews to concentration camps**

In late 1941, the Germans began sending people from the ghettos in Poland to the concentration camps. The Nazis’ mass killings would take place at these camps. From 1942 to 1945, Jews were captured all over Europe and taken to concentration camps. Hundreds of camps were built in Germany and the countries it occupied.

The Nazis tried to hide what happened at the camps. But the size and scale of the camps and the number of killings that took place made this impossible. Eyewitnesses brought reports of Nazi atrocities to the Allied nations. These countries were fighting Germany in World War II. They included Britain, France, the United States and many other countries. After the war, Allied governments were criticized for not doing more to stop the killings.

This lack of action was likely due to a focus on winning the war. But it was also due to shock and denial. Some people refused to believe that such atrocities could be happening on such a huge scale. At Auschwitz alone, more than 2 million people were murdered. The killing continued until the end of the war. In 1944, as many as 12,000 Jews were killed every day.

**Germany loses the war**

By the spring of 1945, German leadership was falling apart. Several Nazi leaders wanted to distance themselves from Hitler and take power. As the war came to a close, Hitler moved into an underground bunker. He killed himself on April 30, 1945. Germany’s official surrender in World War II came almost a week later, on May 8, 1945.

German forces had begun emptying many of the death camps in the fall of 1944. They forced prisoners to march away from the advancing Allied armies. These “death marches” killed some 250,000 to 375,000 people.

Other camps were still occupied when the Allied forces arrived. One of these was Auschwitz. The Italian Jewish writer Primo Levi described life in the camp the day before Allied troops arrived in January 1945. “We lay in a world of death and phantoms,” Levi wrote. “The last trace of civilization had vanished around and inside us.”

**Life was difficult for survivors of the Holocaust**

The wounds of the Holocaust were slow to heal. People who survived the camps found it nearly impossible to return home. In many cases, they had lost their families and been denounced by their non-Jewish neighbors. As a result, the late 1940s saw a great number
of refugees moving across Europe. There was pressure on the Allied nations to make a homeland for Jewish people who survived the Holocaust. This eventually led to the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948.

In the years after the war, Germans struggled with the bitter legacy of the Holocaust. Survivors and the families of victims fought to be repaid for the property stolen from them by the Nazis. In 1953, the German government began to make these payments. This was a way of admitting guilt for the atrocities and crimes committed during the Nazis’ rule.