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

Throughout the spring and summer of 1940, the German army expanded Hitler's empire in Europe, conquering Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg and France. Beginning in 1941, Jews from all over the continent were transported to the Polish ghettos in the poor sections of cities. The German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 marked a new level of brutality in warfare. Mobile killing units called Einsatzgruppen would murder more than 500,000 Soviet Jews and others over the course of the German occupation.

A memorandum dated July 31, 1941, written by Hitler's top commander Hermann Goering, referred to the need for a "final solution" to "the Jewish question." Beginning in September 1941, every person designated as a Jew in German-held territory was marked with a yellow star, making them open targets. Tens of thousands were soon being deported to the Polish ghettos and German-occupied cities in the Soviet Union.
Since June 1941, experiments with mass killing methods had been ongoing at the concentration camp Auschwitz. That August, officials gassed 500 Soviet prisoners of war to death with the pesticide Zyklon-B. Nazi leaders soon placed a huge order for the gas with a German pest control firm, a sinister indicator of the coming Holocaust.

**Millions of Jews sent to death camps**

Beginning in late 1941, the Germans began mass transports from the ghettos in Poland to the concentration camps. They started with those people viewed as the least useful: the sick, the old, the weak and the very young. The first mass gassings began at the camp of Belzec on March 17, 1942. Five more mass killing centers were built at camps in occupied Poland, including Chelmno, Sobibor, Treblinka, Majdanek and the largest of all, Auschwitz-Birkenau. From 1942 to 1945, Jews were deported to the camps from all over Europe, including German-controlled territory as well as those countries allied with Germany. The heaviest deportations took place during the summer and fall of 1942, when more than 300,000 people were deported from the Warsaw Ghetto alone.

The Nazis tried to keep the operation of the camps secret, but the scale of the killing made this impossible. Eyewitnesses brought reports of Nazi atrocities to the governments of the Allies, who were fighting against Germany, Italy and Japan in the war. The Allied powers, which included Britain, France, the United States and many other countries, were harshly criticized after the war for their failure to respond. This lack of action was most likely due to the Allies’ focus on winning the war at hand. But it was also a result of the general incomprehension with which news of the Holocaust was met, and the denial and disbelief that such atrocities could be occurring on such a large scale. At Auschwitz alone, more than 2 million people were murdered in a process resembling a large-scale industrial operation. A large population of Jewish and non-Jewish inmates worked in the labor camp there. Only Jews were gassed to death, but thousands of others died of starvation or disease. During the summer of 1944, even as Germany was beginning to lose the war, a large proportion of Hungary’s Jewish population was deported to Auschwitz. As many as 12,000 Jews were killed every day.

**The end of Nazi rule**

By the spring of 1945, German leadership was dissolving amid internal conflict. Several Nazi leaders were trying to distance themselves from Hitler and take power. In his last will and political testament, dictated in a German bunker on April 29, Hitler blamed the war on “international Jewry and its helpers.” The following day, he committed suicide. Germany’s formal surrender in World War II came barely a week later, on May 8, 1945.

German forces had begun evacuating many of the death camps in the fall of 1944. They sent inmates under guard to march further from the advancing enemy’s front line. These so-called “death marches” resulted in the deaths of some 250,000 to 375,000 people. In his classic book “Survival in Auschwitz,” the Italian Jewish author Primo Levi described his
own state of mind, as well as that of his fellow inmates in Auschwitz, on the day before
Soviet troops arrived at the camp in January 1945: “We lay in a world of death and
phantoms. The last trace of civilization had vanished around and inside us. The work of
bestial degradation, begun by the victorious Germans, had been carried to a conclusion
by the Germans in defeat.”

Many Jewish survivors of the Holocaust were displaced

The wounds of the Holocaust – known in Hebrew as the Shoah, or catastrophe – were slow
to heal. Survivors of 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 and other displaced populations
moving across Europe.

In 1945, the Allies began the Nuremberg Trials, an effort to punish the villains of the
Holocaust. The trials brought Nazi atrocities to horrifying light. Increasing pressure on the
Allied powers to create a homeland for Jewish survivors of the Holocaust eventually led to
the creation of Israel in 1948.

Over the decades that followed, ordinary Germans struggled with the Holocaust’s bitter
legacy. Meanwhile, survivors and the families of victims sought repayment for the wealth
and property confiscated during the Nazi years. Beginning in 1953, the German
government made payments to individual Jews and to the Jewish people as a way of
acknowledging responsibility for the crimes committed in their name.