

History knowledge organiser – Year 9: The Holocaust

Key words and definitions

Holocaust: The Holocaust was the systematic, bureaucratic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of six million Jews by the Nazi regime and its collaborators. *Holocaust* is a word of Greek origin meaning "sacrifice by fire."

Persecution: hostility and ill-treatment, especially because of race or political or religious beliefs; oppression.

Discrimination: the unjust or prejudicial treatment of different categories of people, especially on the grounds of race, age, or sex.

Prejudice: preconceived opinion that is not based on reason or actual experience.

Perpetrators: a person who carries out a harmful, illegal, or immoral act.



Key events

1935: In September, Nazi policy escalated. The Nuremberg Laws reduced Jews to second-class citizens because of their 'impure' blood. Defined by the religion of their grandparents rather than by their own beliefs, Jews were viewed as having impure blood lines. The new laws were taught in schools, cementing anti-Semitism in German culture. Most Germans kept quiet, often benefiting when Jews lost jobs and businesses. Persecution of other minorities also escalated: the police were given new powers to arrest homosexuals and compulsory abortions were administered to women considered to be 'hereditarily ill'.

1937: As the world's eyes were on the battle between Fascism and Communism in Spain, the Nazis stepped up their erosion of civil rights in Germany. Concentration camps began to incarcerate 'habitual criminals' in addition to political prisoners. Goebbels stepped up anti-Semitic propaganda with a traveling exhibition which cast Jews as the enemy.

1938: In March, Germany invaded Austria and by September parts of Czechoslovakia too, drawing new territories under the regime of Nazi persecution. In November, attacks erupted against Jewish businesses. At least 91 Jews died and 267 synagogues were destroyed in a centrally coordinated plot passed off as spontaneous violence across Germany. Thousands of Jews were sent to concentration camps and were only released if they agreed to leave the Nazi territory. Many Jews decided to flee, though options were limited. Britain agreed to house Jewish children, eventually taking in 10,000 minors, but refused to change its policy for Jewish adults.

1940: German forces marched across Europe. Of the occupied countries, some capitulated and implemented Nazi policy immediately. Others held off for longer. For the first time, camps were created specifically for Jews. Their conditions were far worse than other camps. The implicit intention was that the inmates would die there. Increasing numbers of Jews in Poland were relocated in ghettos. Non-Jewish Poles were also deported from their farms and villages to make room for 'pure' ethnic Germans to populate the new territory.

1941: The Nazi policy on Jews moved from expulsion to containment to commanders being ordered to systematically murder the Jews of Europe. Methods of mass murder evolved at local levels as well as being decreed from Nazi high command. Killing squads rounded up and shot entire Jewish communities. Over two days in Kiev, 33,771 Jews were shot. The murder of Jews rapidly escalated, in part because local Nazi leaders didn't have enough room to place them in the ghettos. By the end of the year, plans to implement the systematic slaughter of Jews by using gas in mobile trucks and gas chambers were well underway.

1942: More Jews were murdered in 1942 than in any other year of the Holocaust, the majority in the newly created extermination camps. Of the 430,000 sent to the first death camp at Belzec in Poland, there were only two survivors. 700,000 were killed at Treblinka in just five months. In July, Himmler ordered that all Jews in key areas of Poland, except for those needed for essential labour, were to be killed by the end of the year. Most were. Despite Allied intelligence receiving detailed reports of the mass murders in Europe, the public reaction in Britain was largely a mixture of apathy and disbelief.

1943: Germany was now losing the war. Vital resources were still ploughed into implementing the 'Final Solution' – the extermination of all Jews in Europe. Uprisings broke out in some extermination camps. The few remaining Jews kept alive to dispose of bodies and sort possessions realised the number of transportees was reducing and they would be next. Civilian uprisings occurred across Poland as mainly young Jews, whose families had already been murdered, began to resist Nazi oppression. With reports of rebellion and mass murder in the British press, the situation in the camps could no longer be ignored.

1944: By March, the Allies were driving the German army back. Tens of thousands of Jews held in the eastern territories were marched towards the heart of Germany so they could not bear witness to the Allies. Aware that the world had been alerted to the horrors of the camps, the Nazis sought to destroy evidence. In June, Soviet forces liberated the first major camp, known as Majdanek, in Lublin, Poland. The Nazis had burned down the crematorium chimney but had failed to destroy the gas chambers and barracks. Only a few hundred inmates were still alive.

1945: As the Allies swept to victory in Europe and camps were liberated across the once Nazi-occupied territories, the full scale of the Holocaust emerged. The Allies found camps that were catastrophically over-crowded with no food or sanitation. General Eisenhower ordered careful documentation of evidence by occupying troops as thoughts turned to justice. Hitler and other senior Nazis including Himmler and Goebbels killed themselves. In November, trials of captured Nazi leaders began at Nuremberg.

1946: The international military tribunal delivered its verdict on 21 senior Nazi officials. 18 were found guilty and three were acquitted. 11 of Hitler's deputies were given death sentences, including Goering, the most senior surviving Nazi. However he too committed suicide the night before he was due to hang. Others received prison terms. Albert Speer, Hitler's personal architect, was released in 1966 and spent his remaining years writing about the Nazi regime, donating most of his royalties to Jewish charities. Rudolph Hess committed suicide in prison in 1987. Many Nazis evaded justice altogether and were never tried.