

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Questions and Answers¹

Why did the Nazis target Jewish People?

The Nazis targeted Jewish People because the Nazis were radically antisemitic. This means that they were prejudiced against and hated Jewish People. In fact, antisemitism was a basic tenet of their ideology and at the foundation of their worldview.

The Nazis falsely accused Jewish People of causing Germany's social, economic, political, and cultural problems. In particular, they blamed them for Germany's defeat in World War I (1914–1918). Some Germans were receptive to these Nazi claims. Anger over the loss of the war and the economic and political crises that followed contributed to increasing antisemitism in German society. The instability of Germany under the Weimar Republic (1918–1933), the fear of communism, and the economic shocks of the Great Depression also made many Germans more open to Nazi ideas, including antisemitism.

However, the Nazis did not invent antisemitism. Antisemitism is an old and widespread prejudice that has taken many forms throughout history. In Europe, it dates back to ancient times. In the Middle Ages (500–1400), prejudices against Jewish People were primarily based in early Christian belief and thought, particularly the myth that Jewish People were responsible for the death of Jesus. Suspicion and discrimination rooted in religious prejudices continued in early modern Europe (1400–1800). At that time, leaders in much of Christian Europe isolated Jewish People from most aspects of economic, social, and political life. This exclusion contributed to stereotypes of Jewish People as outsiders. As Europe became more secular, many places lifted most legal restrictions on Jewish People. This, however, did not mean the end of antisemitism. In addition to religious antisemitism, other types of antisemitism took hold in Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries. These new forms included economic, nationalist, and racial antisemitism. In the 19th century, antisemites falsely claimed that Jewish People were responsible for many social and political ills in modern, industrial society. Theories of race, eugenics, and Social Darwinism falsely justified these hatreds. Nazi prejudice against Jewish People drew upon all of these elements, but especially racial antisemitism. Racial antisemitism is the discriminatory idea that Jewish People are a separate and inferior race.

¹ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. "Introduction to the Holocaust." Holocaust Encyclopedia. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/introduction-to-the-holocaust>. Accessed on April 23, 2023.

What government officials, lawyers, and other professionals were involved in the development, distribution, and implementation of these measures?

The Nazi Party promoted a particularly virulent form of racial antisemitism. It was central to the party's race-based worldview. The Nazis believed that the world was divided into distinct races and that some of these races were superior to others. They considered Germans to be members of the supposedly superior "Aryan" race. They asserted that "Aryans" were locked in a struggle for existence with other, inferior races. Further, the Nazis believed that the so-called "Jewish race" was the most inferior and dangerous of all. According to the Nazis, Jewish People were a threat that needed to be removed from German society. Otherwise, the Nazis insisted, the "Jewish race" would permanently corrupt and destroy the German people. The Nazis' race-based definition of Jewish People included many persons who identified as Christians or did not practice Judaism.

How did Nazi Germany and its allies and collaborators persecute Jewish people?

Between 1933 and 1945, Nazi Germany and its allies and collaborators implemented a wide range of anti-Jewish policies and measures. These policies varied from place to place. Thus, not all Jewish People experienced the Holocaust in the same way. But in all instances, millions of people were persecuted simply because they were identified as Jewish.

Throughout German-controlled and aligned territories, the persecution of Jewish People took a variety of forms:

- Legal discrimination in the form of antisemitic laws. These included the Nuremberg Race Laws and numerous other discriminatory laws.
- Various forms of public identification and exclusion. These included antisemitic propaganda, boycotts of Jewish-owned businesses, public humiliation, and obligatory markings (such as the Jewish star badge worn as an armband or on clothing).
- Organized violence. The most notable example is Kristallnacht. There were also isolated incidents and other pogroms (violent riots).
- Physical Displacement. Perpetrators used forced emigration, resettlement, View This Term in the Glossary expulsion, deportation, and ghettoization to physically displace Jewish individuals and communities.
- Internment. Perpetrators interned Jewish People in overcrowded ghettos, concentration camps, and forced-labor camps, where many died from starvation, disease, and other inhumane conditions.

- Widespread theft and plunder. The confiscation of Jewish People's property, personal belongings, and valuables was a key part of the Holocaust.
- Forced labor. Jewish People had to perform forced labor in service of the Axis war effort or for the enrichment of Nazi organizations, the military, and/or private businesses.

Many Jewish People died as a result of these policies. But before 1941, the systematic mass murder of all Jewish People was not Nazi policy. Beginning in 1941, however, Nazi leaders decided to implement the mass murder of Europe's Jewish People. They referred to this plan as the "Final Solution to the Jewish Question."

What was the "Final Solution to the Jewish Question"?

The Nazi "Final Solution to the Jewish Question" was the deliberate and systematic mass murder of European Jewish People. It was the last stage of the Holocaust and took place from 1941 to 1945. Though many Jewish People were killed before the "Final Solution", the vast majority of Jewish victims were murdered during this period.

As part of the "Final Solution," Nazi Germany committed mass murder on an unprecedented scale. There were two main methods of killing. One method was mass shooting. German units carried out mass shootings on the outskirts of villages, towns, and cities throughout eastern Europe. The other method was asphyxiation with poison gas. Gassing operations were conducted at killing centers and with mobile gas vans.

Mass Shootings

The Nazi German regime perpetrated mass shootings of civilians on a scale never seen before. After Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, German units began to carry out mass shootings of local Jewish People. At first, these units targeted Jewish men of military age. But by August 1941, they had started massacring entire Jewish communities. These massacres were often conducted in broad daylight and in full view and earshot of local residents.

The German units that perpetrated the mass shootings in eastern Europe included Einsatzgruppen (special task forces of the SS and police), Order Police battalions, and Waffen-SS units. The German military (Wehrmacht) provided logistical support and manpower. Some Wehrmacht units also carried out massacres. In many places, local auxiliary units working with the SS and police participated in the mass shootings. These auxiliary units were made up of local civilian, military, and police officials.

As many as 2 million Jewish People were murdered in mass shootings or gas vans in territories seized from Soviet forces.

Killing Centers

In late 1941, the Nazi regime began building specially designed, stationary killing centers in German-occupied Poland. In English, killing centers are sometimes called “extermination camps” or “death camps.” Nazi Germany operated five killing centers: Chelmno, Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka, and Auschwitz-Birkenau. They built these killing centers for the sole purpose of efficiently murdering Jewish People on a mass scale. The primary means of murder at the killing centers was poisonous gas released into sealed gas chambers or vans.

German authorities, with the help of their allies and collaborators, transported Jewish People from across Europe to these killing centers. They disguised their intentions by calling the transports to the killing centers “resettlement actions” or “evacuation transports.” In English, they are often referred to as “deportations.” Most of these deportations took place by train. In order to efficiently transport Jewish People to the killing centers, German authorities used the extensive European railroad system, as well as other means of transportation. In many cases the railcars on the trains were freight cars; in other instances they were passenger cars.

The conditions on deportation transports were horrific. German and collaborating local authorities forced Jewish People of all ages into overcrowded railcars. They often had to stand, sometimes for days, until the train reached its destination. The perpetrators deprived them of food, water, bathrooms, heat, and medical care. Jewish People frequently died en route from the inhumane conditions.

The vast majority of Jewish People deported to killing centers were gassed almost immediately after their arrival. Some Jewish People whom German officials believed to be healthy and strong enough were selected for forced labor.

Nearly 2.7 million Jewish men, women, and children were murdered at the five killing centers.