



## THE HOLOCAUST

The word 'holocaust' comes from the ancient Greek word for 'sacrifice by fire'. In the 19th century it was used to refer to mass slaughter, especially by fire. The mass killing of Jews by Nazis was referred to as 'this holocaust' in the British parliament in 1943, and by the 1950s the name was widely applied. Jews often prefer to name the event 'Shoah', which means 'catastrophe'.

### BEFORE THE GENOCIDE

1914

The First World War begins. A 25-year-old Austrian, Adolf Hitler, volunteers for the German Army. He serves throughout the war and sees thousands of his fellow-soldiers die.

1919

The Treaty of Versailles, which follows the end of the First World War, is vindictive. According to its terms, Germany is to pay the cost of the war: an additional humiliation for the loser and the cause of economic ruin. It is also to lose land in Europe and Africa; its armed forces are to be limited.

1920

The Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei, the National Socialist German Workers Party, is founded. Hitler, who has discovered his natural ability to make stirring public speeches, becomes its leader. The Nazi party programme includes this statement: 'None but members of the Nation may be citizens of the State. None but those of German blood, whatever their creed, may be members of the Nation. No Jew, therefore, may be a member of the Nation.' Hitler tells his followers that his aim is 'the removal of Jews from the midst of our people'.

1923

Hitler leads an unsuccessful coup and is imprisoned for 13 months. While in prison he writes 'Mein Kampf' ('My Struggle') which later becomes a bestseller. It contains his fundamental beliefs: the German or 'Aryan' master-race must be kept 'pure', with no intermarriage; Germany must be made great again, taking new territory to the east as its rightful lebensraum ('space for living'); the Aryans' greatest enemy is the Jews.

1926

'Hitler Youth' is founded for children and young people under 18, with camps and rallies, marches and sports events. 'Racial purity' is stressed, and Jews are not allowed to join.

1930

Nazi militia attack and kill 8 Jews in Berlin. Jews begin to be harassed and abused in streets, shops, cafés, and other public places. Anti-Jewish notices and slogans start to appear. The

Nazi party wins 107 seats in the German parliament, and by 1933 will have become the largest single party. Communists, to whom the government and the Nazis are fiercely opposed, are a close second.

1933

On January 30, in an attempt to use Hitler and his party against the Communists, the German president appoints Hitler to be Chancellor (prime minister) of Germany. A week before elections, a mysterious fire destroys the parliament building; the Nazis blame the Communists, win 44% of the vote, and come to power by the will of the people. An act of law is immediately passed, giving Hitler the powers of a dictator for 4 years. The secret police force Geheime Staatspolizei, 'Gestapo', is formed. It is given full powers to spy, arrest, interrogate and imprison. Jewish businesses are boycotted for one day. Books written by Jews are publicly burned as 'degenerate'. A series of anti-Jewish laws are passed: Jews are barred from all public service, including the civil service, the law, and teaching. Jewish doctors are banned from Berlin hospitals, and can find no other employment. Jews are also barred from sports organisations, and from being journalists on German newspapers. Individual Jews are attacked, and some are killed. The Nazi newspaper says 'Jews can never be anything but stateless aliens, they can never have any legal or constitutional status.' A concentration camp for imprisoning Nazi opponents is set up at Dachau.

1934

The Nazi party's new militia, the black-shirted Schutzstaffeln (SS), is created. Hitler's main rivals are assassinated. All other political parties are banned. Germany's president dies and Hitler at once makes himself not only Head of State but also Chief of the Armed Forces, and begins to ensure his popularity by re-arming them. He also revitalises the arms industry and other industrial projects, delighting the German people with his promises of an end to poverty and unemployment. Jewish actors are banned from appearing on stage or screen. No Jews can now take law exams. Jewish newspapers can no longer be publicly displayed and sold.

1935

Jews are forbidden to serve in the German armed forces. New war memorials must not carry the names of any Jews who died while fighting for Germany in the First World War. The 'Nuremberg Laws', signed by Hitler personally, are passed: they state that (a) only people of German or kindred blood can be German citizens; (b) Jews are not of German blood. Marriages between Jews and non-Jews are forbidden. 'No Jews Allowed' signs increase significantly in offices, shops, hotels, and other public places. 'Jew-free' and 'Jews not welcome here' banners are displayed at the entrances to towns and villages.

1936

Another burning of books by Jewish writers takes place, three years to the day after the first. Jewish doctors are forbidden to practise in any state hospital. Because international attention is focused on the Olympic Games, held in Berlin this year, persecution of Jews is more discreet. A concentration camp is opened at Sachsenhausen.

1937

Jews are forced to sell their businesses, mostly for very low sums. Jews are increasingly

excluded from such places as parks, libraries and museums. The number of Jews emigrating increases: by 1939 half of Germany's half million Jews have left the country, the largest number (over 160,000) moving to America. Over 33,000 move to Palestine. Anti-Semitic laws are passed in Romania; by 1939 no Jew will be able to have a job there. A concentration camp is opened at Buchenwald.

1938

German troops enter and annex Austria. They immediately close down Austrian Jewish organisations and begin looting Jewish residences, removing valuables (including two fine art collections). Austrian Jews are beaten and humiliated (some are publicly forced to wash Vienna's streets on their knees). They are also dismissed from their jobs and expelled from institutions. Hundreds commit suicide, thousands emigrate; the property of the rest is confiscated. In Germany, 15,000 Polish-born Jews are expelled across the Polish border, without property, shelter or resources. Jewish doctors are forbidden to treat non-Jews. The Nazis' 'Kristallnacht', the night of broken glass, takes place on November 8/9: Jewish shops and houses are vandalised, synagogues are set on fire and over 90 Jews are killed. The Jewish community is ordered to pay for the damage. German Jewish children are excluded from schools. Jewish businesses and factories are forcibly taken over. Already there are 45,000 Jews imprisoned and brutally treated in concentration camps; some prisoners die, some commit suicide. An international conference is held at Evian in France, and Jewish refugees are discussed: many countries say they are unwilling to go on accepting them, and Britain cuts back the admission of Jewish emigrants to Palestine. Anti-Semitic laws are passed in Hungary and by the fascist government in Italy. Concentration camps are opened at Neuengamme and Mauthausen.

1939

Hitler predicts that if there is war, Jews will be exterminated. On September 1 Germany invades and occupies western Poland, home to nearly 3m Jews, and the USSR occupies eastern Poland. German troops and SS units take every opportunity to torment, beat or kill Polish Jews. On the eve of the invasion, Hitler (who regarded Poles as 'primitive', 'subhuman') is reported by one of his generals to say: 'Genghis Khan had millions killed, and history sees him only as a great state-builder. I have sent my Death's Head units to the East in order to kill without mercy men, women and children of the Polish race or language. Only in such a way will we win the lebensraum that we need.' All Polish Jews are ordered to wear identification armbands showing the Star of David emblem. The first ghettos are set up in Poland, and Jews are forcibly brought in from town, country and abroad to endure the overcrowded and insanitary conditions. The ghettos are walled and locked, to isolate Jews from the rest of the population. A concentration camp is opened at Ravensbruck.

1940

The Warsaw Ghetto is set up, in which over 500,000 Jews are confined. Jews in the ghettos are temporarily allowed to produce goods for the German war effort, which offers them short-lived hope of survival. Labour camps (associated with war-support industries such as building work or making armaments) are set up in or near ghettos and are staffed by Jews forced to work there, increasingly as slaves. Most Jews have now been deprived of all or most of their human rights. A concentration camp is opened at Auschwitz.

## THE GENOCIDE

1941

Germany attacks and invades eastern Poland and the Soviet Union. Einsatzgruppen - armed militias forming mobile killing units - follow the troops and commit mass slaughter of Jews throughout eastern Europe (including the Baltic states) and in the western USSR. The Einsatzgruppen (increased from an initial 4,000 men to 40,000 within a year) target Jews and also Gypsies, Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, homosexuals and other minorities, all of whom will continue to be persecuted for the rest of the war. By the end of the year 440,000 Jews have been shot, many after first being forced to dig their own mass graves. Wearing a yellow Star of David is now compulsory for all Jews over the age of 6. German Jews are forbidden to use public transport or telephones. The German Head of Security is ordered to commence arrangements for the Endlösung, the Final Solution of 'the Jewish problem': it is understood that this means annihilation. Terezin, a town in German-occupied Czechoslovakia, is selected to become a ghetto town and renamed Theresienstadt. Jews are deported here from occupied Europe; most will be transferred to death camps from 1942, but many (over 33,500) will die here from starvation and disease, as is already happening in all the ghettos. Ghetto inhabitants are also being shot on the slightest pretext. The first discreet deportations of German Jews begin: these people are told that they are to be settled in the east as part of the new expansion of Germany, but in fact they are taken to ghettos, slave labour camps, or immediate death in Poland or German-occupied Russia. A site is set up at Chelmno in Poland specifically for exterminations; the first victims are Roma (231,800 Gypsies will be killed by 1945) and Russian prisoners of war, to be followed by Jews from the ghetto at Lodz. Mobile extermination vans using gas start to be used in Poland, Latvia and Serbia; the first gas chamber experiments are made on Jews interned at Auschwitz.

1942

On January 20 SS chiefs meet at a private lakeside villa on the Wannsee near Berlin, to discuss co-ordination of the Final Solution on an industrial scale. 'Special treatment' is agreed, to intensify experiments with gas, set up more custom-built death camps, seek professional assistance in building and use of crematoria, rationalise the transport of Jews by rail from all over Europe, and recruit additional paramilitary teams: the overall watchword is efficiency (such as putting the fittest Jews to forced labour until they cease to be useful, and annihilating the rest with maximum speed and secrecy). Death camps are set up and opened in Poland at Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka. The existing camp at Majdanek, and also at Auschwitz (where a second camp equipped with huge crematoria and gas-chambers has been built), are adapted for slaughter. Here and at Chelmno most of Poland's 3m Jews begin to be sent to their deaths. An additional death camp is set up at Maly Trostinets, near Minsk in German-occupied USSR; most of the deportees from the Theresienstadt ghetto are brought here and murdered on the way from the railway station to the camp. Dutch, Belgian and Slovak Jews are rounded up and deported. There is some co-operation from local police in allied and occupied countries, who assist with deportation. As secrecy becomes less possible, Jewish councils and police are forced to supply daily quotas of ghetto inhabitants for transporting to death camps. A total of 2.7m Jews are killed in 1942.

1943

The operation of the Final Solution extends to the Balkans, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Italy and Greece. Bulgaria and Hungary refuse to deport Jews. Most of the Jews in occupied Denmark are assisted by Danes to escape to neutral Sweden; other acts of resistance are occurring throughout the occupied countries of Europe. The Warsaw ghetto uprising is crushed. Liquidation of all Polish Jewish ghettos is ordered. Sobibor and Treblinka are closed after prisoners' rebellions. Berlin is declared 'Jew-free'. The Nazis launch an operation named Erntefest - harvest festival - to complete the extermination of Jews in Poland: 40,000 are shot in one day. In the east, as the Soviet army recaptures lost territory, orders are issued to destroy evidence of mass murder there: Kommando 1005 organises a Jewish slave labour force to dig up 2 million bodies, burn them and grind the bones to dust; after each clearance, the labourers are themselves murdered. This work takes a year to complete. A concentration and Jewish transit camp is set up at Bergen-Belsen, where 37,000 (Anne Frank among them) will die in appalling conditions from starvation, overwork and disease.

1944

Germany occupies Hungary, to prevent this ally from defecting; at once over half of Hungary's 700,000 Jews are sent to the death camp at Auschwitz, with a few thousand selected for labour camps. Two Jews escape from Auschwitz to tell the West what is happening; one courier is told, 'I'm not saying you're lying, it's just that I can't believe it.' The last ghettos are 'liquidated' now that it looks likely that Germany will lose the war. On German territory, camps begin to be evacuated; hundreds of thousands of Jewish prisoners are forced to move on, often aimlessly and mainly on foot; on these frequent 'death marches' throughout eastern Europe, many are left by the roadside to die from weakness, hunger and illness, or are shot because they cannot keep up. There is a revolt of Jewish slave labourers at the Auschwitz crematoria; the destruction of the crematoria is ordered. Soviet troops liberate Majdanek, and the whole site is designated a permanent memorial and museum.

1945

There is a prisoners' revolt at Chelmno. Soviet troops liberate Warsaw, a now almost empty Auschwitz, and Theresienstadt. (Most of the stores at Auschwitz have been burned down by the departing SS, but in the six that are left, the Russians find 836,255 dresses, 348,000 men's suits and 38,000 pairs of men's shoes.) American troops liberate Buchenwald, Dachau and Mauthausen. British troops liberate Bergen-Belsen. Allied troops also liberate the surviving prisoners (15,000 out of 26,000) on a 12-day death march from the camp at Sachsenhausen. Hitler commits suicide. Germany surrenders.

## AFTER THE GENOCIDE

1945-

The survivors are taken to camps for Displaced Persons. It will take over five years to find homes for many of them. Some Jews return to Poland, to find their homes occupied by Poles who are unwilling to leave, and to face violence: over 1,000 returning Polish Jews are killed by non-Jewish civilians. Further migration to Palestine is blocked by Britain; some Jews who ignore the British ban are interned in camps in Cyprus, and even in Germany. Poland is reconstructed; part of east Germany is now incorporated, from which the Poles immediately

expel German nationals. The Commandant of Belsen and 10 of his staff are tried (for torture, shooting and gassing of thousands of inmates) by a British military tribunal and executed in 1945. The international trials in Nuremberg of 22 leading Nazis begin in 1945; 12 are sentenced to be hanged in 1946, 7 are imprisoned and 3 acquitted. Both the owner and the manager of the company that made the poison gas (Zyklon B) used in the death camps are also executed in 1946. Several thousand individual Nazi criminals are hunted and tried in courts in Germany or the country of their capture; about 450 are executed. Most are imprisoned; some in Germany are later released before serving their full sentence. Many Nazis flee to hide in South American or Arabian countries. (Between 1945 and 1985 up to 5,000 convicted war criminals are executed and 10,000 imprisoned.)

1947

The Commandant of Auschwitz is tried and executed in Warsaw, having been found guilty of overseeing the murder of 4 million Jews, Gypsies, Poles and other Slavs. (He does not deny the charge but pleads that he acted under orders from a higher authority.) Auschwitz-Birkenau is designated a memorial and museum. It is the largest Jewish cemetery in the world.

1948

British administration of Palestine (under a mandate of the League of Nations) ends, and within hours the State of Israel is founded, amidst fierce war with Palestinian and other Arabs. (War or armed violence between Israelis and Palestinians will break out repeatedly through the rest of the century.) About 100,000 Jews - half the number who survive the Holocaust - are now living in Israel.

1949

An archive about the Warsaw ghetto and its uprising is set up in Israel.

1953

The Israeli parliament passes a law making it their duty to recognise the work of non-Jews who managed to save Jewish lives during the Second World War. Such people become known as 'Righteous Gentiles', changed later to 'Righteous Persons'. In 1962 an Avenue of the Righteous is created in Jerusalem, in which every non-Jew who helped Jews plants a tree or has one planted in his or her name. Righteous Person awards and medals have been given to the Norwegian and Danish resisters who helped Jews escape to Sweden, and to villages and families who hid, fed and helped Jews either to escape or to survive. By 1999 16,540 'righteous persons' had been honoured with this title. Over 5,000 are Polish, over 4,000 are Dutch, over 1,700 are French, over 1,200 are Ukrainian and over 1,000 are Belgian. 327 are German. 11 are British.

1960-

A leading Nazi war criminal, Adolf Eichmann, is seized in Argentina by Israeli secret police, who abduct him to Israel where he is tried and hanged. The pursuit of war criminals, and the capture of a few of them, is revived, and has continued to this day. Elie Wiesel, a survivor, publishes 'Night', a book about his experience during the Holocaust. The history of the Holocaust is now becoming more widely known and studied. Many survivors, however, find it

very difficult to speak about the horrors they experienced. All lament that their own children have been deprived of an extended family of grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins.

1961

Yad Vashem, Israel's Holocaust memorial and museum, opens.

1968

Faced with a return of anti-Semitism in Poland, Polish Jews emigrate to Israel. A museum is opened at the site of Treblinka death camp.

1977

First issue of 'The Voices of Auschwitz Survivors', a newsletter for survivors. In America the Simon Wiesenthal centre in Los Angeles is opened, named after the Viennese Austrian who has made the pursuit of Nazi war criminals his life's work. A Museum of Tolerance, containing a section devoted to the Holocaust, is added later.

1980

First international gathering of Holocaust survivors, in Jerusalem.

1985

Claude Lanzmann releases 'Shoah', his documentary film about the Holocaust and its aftermath.

1988

With the collapse of communism several thousand Soviet Jewish survivors emigrate to Israel, America and also Germany.

1990-

In this decade new evidence of the savage persecution of Jews in Europe during the Second World War continues to appear. Disputes and claims over money and property confiscated at that time become more frequent, and reparation is sought for this and for the use of Jews as slave labourers in the factories of still-existing businesses. Public advertisements invite the submission of claims by due dates. The responsibility of the German people is revived as a controversial subject, after published research into civilian-staffed paramilitary and killing units. 'Holocaust denial' becomes a phenomenon, and an historian who promotes this view loses a highly-publicised court case. Active Neo-Nazism is also a growing problem in Germany and some other European countries.

1992

A Holocaust museum is opened on the site of the former ghetto of Theresienstadt.

1993

In the USA, film director Steven Spielberg (whose 1993 film 'Schindler's List' tells the story of a man who saved the lives of over 1,000 Jews) sets up the Shoah Foundation project to record the testimonies of survivors. Washington's Holocaust Memorial Museum opens, including a

library of 100,000 books about the Holocaust. Since then Holocaust memorials and museums have opened in many other American cities, and elsewhere in the world, including Berlin.

1994

Britain's first Holocaust memorial centre, Beth Shalom, opens.

2000

The Imperial War Museum in London opens its permanent Holocaust Exhibition. On January 27 Britain's first national Holocaust Memorial Day is observed. It was thought that after the Holocaust genocide could and would never happen again; but it has, and part of the purpose of remembering genocide is to continue to strive to prevent it.

## WITNESS

Asylum-seeking: 'Any Jewish refugee was only accepted in Britain if a British citizen provided an assurance that the refugee would not require public financial assistance. Some churches and peace groups raised funds so that such assurances could be given, but this could help only a small proportion of those who desperately wanted to seek sanctuary in the UK. Some groups found foster homes for Jewish children, who were thus parted from their parents, as it turned out, for ever.'

Hatred: 'My first encounter with anti-Semitism came when I was only 3 years old, in 1933. My parents and I were looking out of our window when a formation of the Hitler Youth marched past, singing a song that even I understood: "When Jewish blood sprays from our knives". I can still remember the horror on my parents' faces. I escaped to Palestine in 1943, where I was filled with hatred for the British occupying power, especially when they began to restrict the immigration of Holocaust survivors. We Jews said that we would never again go like sheep to slaughter, or not without putting up a fight. We felt we lived in a world of wild beasts, and to survive we would become like them. When the British left in 1948 there was more fighting between Jews and Arabs, and I joined the Israeli Army: I was convinced I couldn't let myself be trampled on. My unit was detailed to an area to evict Palestinians at short notice. We didn't let them leave in peace, we turned on them in sheer hatred. We beat them and interrogated them brutally. Some were murdered. We hadn't been ordered to do this, we did it on our own initiative. Our lowest instincts had been released.

Suddenly my childhood in wartime flashed before my eyes. In my mind I relived my own experiences as a 10-year-old driven from my home town. Here too were people - men, women, children - fleeing with whatever they could carry. And there was fear in their eyes, a fear I knew myself, all too well. I was very distressed. But I was under orders, and went on searching the Palestinians for valuables. At least I was no longer a victim. I was in power.'

## ISSUES

Three warnings of genocide:



First, the gradual, insidious build-up of oppression and dehumanisation. In the case of the Holocaust it was, at least at first, carried out with a semblance of law, only reaching its industrial scale under cover of war. Those gradual early stages have been repeated against other oppressed minorities before and since; Gypsies, for example, are still a target of oppression in Europe.

Second, the problem of when (and from whom) to carry out an order, when (and how) to refuse, and when (and how) to recognise that one is using an order to justify something dubious one wants to do.

Third, the problem of victimhood, now a high-profile aspect of human rights abuses. It, too, is used to justify controversial actions.