Anatomy of the Holocaust

In the Holocaust, the Nazis tried to kill every Jew in Europe—and nearly succeeded. How could it have happened? Here's how—step-by-step—from the first breach of civil rights to the gas chambers.

By Herbert Buchsbaum

The Holocaust didn't happen overnight. Nazi Germany's attempt to kill all the Jews of Europe took place gradually, over many years. Its roots can be found in the ashes of World War I, where Germany was defeated and humiliated, and in the age-old history of German anti-Semitism, which had crested and fallen over the centuries, but always remained strong.

Into this volatile mix walked a madman, Adolf Hitler, who combined maniacal hatred of Jews with fervent nationalism. Germans were ready for someone who could restore their national pride. And in the Jews, they found a scapegoat for their current problems. The Great Depression swept in, turning despair into anger and increasing Hitler's popularity.

As the Nazis won political power, they began chipping away at civil rights, turning prejudiced ideas into murderous policy. The following timeline traces the Holocaust from Hitler's rise to the Nazis' near-annihilation of an entire people. As you'll see, it is a history filled with lost opportunities. At many steps along the way, people could have opposed the Nazis. But not many did.

When you read this summary of events, pay close attention to the way common, everyday bigotry grows into outright terror. The loss of a few civil rights can turn into the loss of all rights. What could have been done to prevent the Holocaust? What obligation do other countries have to prevent the slaughter of innocent civilians? How might you have acted?

**WORLD WAR I ENDS**

1919: The Treaty of Versailles officially ends World War I. As the loser, Germany is forced to reduce its army and pay $57 trillion for damages. The punishment humiliates the country and bankrupts its economy. Widespread anger gives rise to new German political groups, including the National Socialist German Workers' Party, the Nazis. Anti-Semitic, patriotic, and anti-democratic, the Nazis blame Germany's defeat on the Jews and promise jobs, food, and education to all Germans. That fall, a fiery Nazi speaker named Adolf Hitler begins to draw crowds in a German beer hall. He promises "to struggle until the last Jew is removed from the German empire."

1920: The Nazis issue a 25-point program, asserting that no Jew could ever be part of the German people.

1923: The Nazis attempt to overthrow the democratic government and fail. In November, Hitler begins a jail term for his part in the plot. There he writes his autobiography, Mein Kampf (My Struggle), which outlines his racial and religious theories. Germans, he writes, are "Aryans," a "master race" entitled to rule.

Crowds of admiring Germans saluting Hitler, who promised to restore Germany's national honor, provide jobs, and get rid of the Jews.
the world. Their enemies are the evil, “vampire” Jews, who also want to rule the world. Most Germans dismiss Hitler as a raving lunatic.

NAZIS WIN POWER
1930: The worldwide Great Depression helps the Nazis, with their promises of jobs and a strong Germany, win 18 percent of the vote.
1932: The Nazis win 37 percent of the vote and become Germany’s largest political party. The continuing economic and political crisis increases the demand for strong leadership.
1933: On January 30, Hitler is appointed Germany’s chancellor. He immediately suppresses political opposition with a ban on meetings and publications believed to “endanger public security.”

RIGHTS CURTAILED
1933: In February, the Reichstag, or parliament, is burned. A Dutch

Hitler frequently staged rallies to demonstrate his support and his military strength. By 1934, 4 million men had found jobs by joining the Storm Troops, a private army loyal to the Nazi party.

Communist is accused of the crime. The next day, Hitler issues a series of emergency decrees to protect the state “against Communist acts of violence.” The decrees suspend freedoms of speech, press, and assembly; freedom from invasion of privacy; and freedom from search without a warrant. The death penalty is expanded to punish treason, which is redefined to cover any form of dissent.

On March 20, the Nazis open their first concentration camp in Dachau, Germany. Within the year, they will build nine more.

Meanwhile, the Storm Troops, the Nazis’ private army, and police burn Communist and Socialist party offices, beating and arresting party officials. When the Reichstag reopens, with all Communist and 26 Socialist members missing, it votes 441 to 94 to give Hitler total power.

ANTI-JEWISH LAWS
1933: On April 1, the government orders a three-day boycott of Jewish-owned businesses. Storm Troops are stationed in front of Jewish-owned stores, but are ordered not to interfere with any violence. Jewish leaders protest, but universities, courts, and churches are silent.

Six days later, the first anti-Jewish law is decreed, banning Jews from many service jobs, including those in law, medicine, and civil service. Schools and universities set admission quotas limiting the number of places for non-Aryans. Jews, defined as anyone with at least one Jewish grandparent, are automatically deemed non-Aryans.
"Jews are not wanted here," reads a sign outside a German town. Signs like this also appeared outside stores and restaurants. They were a common sight after passage of laws stripping Jews of their rights.

In May, books written by Jews and other enemies of the government are burned. During the year, 37,000 Jews leave the country. But most Jews still think of themselves as patriotic Germans and call those who leave deserters.

In July, the government bans all political parties except the Nazis. In an effort to supposedly "purify" German blood, a law also legalizes forced sterilization of people afflicted with certain hereditary diseases. Eventually, more than 200,000 people will be sterilized—including people of mixed race, criminals, the disabled, and "asocial elements."

1934: The SS, an elite army sworn to Hitler's loyalty, takes control of the concentration camps. Elaborate systems are established for spying on Jews and disloyal Germans, including a network of thousands of informers. Children are encouraged to report on their parents' activities, spreading fear even at home.

1935: In March, Hitler denounces the Versailles Treaty and calls for universal military service. Other European countries protest, but Hitler reassures them by offering treaties, saying that his goal is peace.

1936: As the Summer Olympics is held in Berlin, anti-Jewish signs are temporarily removed. Now, and during other fullests in the violence, most Jews succumb to relief, believing that Nazism will pass. Jews have lived in Germany for 1,000 years and survived anti-Semitism many times before.

1937: By now, 129,000 Jews, one-quarter of the Jewish population of Germany, have fled. Laws are adopted declaring Gypsies enemies and sending them to concentration camps.

1938: In March, Germany takes over Austria, which welcomes the invasion and follows up with mass arrests and expulsions of Jews. Jewish men and women are forced to scrub streets, sidewalks, and public toilets, while taunted by jeering crowds.

In May, mass arrests of Jews begin. Concentration camps are transformed from detention centers for political opponents to slave-labor camps.

A young man sweeping up broken glass from the windows of Jewish shops in Berlin after Kristallnacht.
goods gains momentum, but no government takes action.

**1939:** Germany and Austria step up the expulsion of Jews. By spring, 250,000 Jews, about 40 percent of the German Jewish population, will have left Germany. About 100,000 Jews will flee Austria.

Britain and the U.S. turn down proposals to save 20,000 Jewish children. Ships carrying Jewish refugees are turned back from the shores of Palestine, the U.S., and other countries.

**WAR BREAKS OUT**

**1939:** On September 1, Germany invades Poland, officially beginning World War II. The Nazis establish ghettos in the major cities, forcing all Jews to live in squalid, overcrowded neighborhoods. Indiscriminate torture and shooting of Polish Jews follow, with 250,000 killed by December. Massacres occur in eight towns, including one in which all male Jews are forced to dig their own graves, then are shot.

The “Euthanasia Program” begins. Over the next two years, Hitler will try to purify “the master race” by killing 200,000 people who are mentally ill, homosexual, foreign, terminally ill, or elderly. Massive church opposition finally halts the program, but not the killing of Jews.

In November, all Jews over age 10 are ordered to wear a yellow star with the word “Jew” in it.

**1940:** In May, Germany takes over Denmark and southern Norway and invades Holland, Belgium, and France. Home, the Nazis begin rounding up Gypsies. Ultimately, more than 400,000 will be killed.

**MASSACRES**

**1941:** Germany invades Yugoslavia and Greece in April, attacks the Soviet Union in June, and declares war on the U.S. in December. The invading troops are accompanied by mobile death squads, who execute a million civilians in less than a year. In many countries, local citizens join the death squads or form their own units. Typically, the squad enters a town, orders Jews to assemble for “resettlement,” takes their valuables, marches them to a large ditch or ravine, orders them to strip, and shoots them.

By this time, even some Nazi officials protest the killings as a waste of needed Jewish labor and a diversion of troops and weapons from the front. But genocide takes precedence over military strategy. In two days in September, 30,000 Jews are killed in a ravine near Kiev, Ukraine. They are ordered to lie naked, face-down in the dirt, then shot one at a time in the back of the neck. Then the next group is ordered to lie down on top of the bodies, and the process continues.

Jewish survivors are marched through Warsaw, Poland, after the ghetto there was burned in May 1943. The Warsaw Jews fought back for nearly a month, forcing several retreats and inflicting hundreds of German casualties.

On October 23, 19,000 Jews are burned alive in Odessa, also in the Ukraine. In other massacres, whole communities of Jews are machine-gunned, with those who survive the gunfire being buried alive. With Jewish men serving in the Soviet military, most of the victims are women, the elderly, and children.

**THE “FINAL SOLUTION”**

**1942:** On January 20, Nazi officials meet in a villa in the Berlin suburb of Wannsee. There, they officially adopt “the final solution to the Jewish question”: the planned death of every Jew in Europe. From now on, Jews will be killed more efficiently. Gas chambers, camouflaged as shower rooms, are built at six death camps in Poland. In the next two years, more than 5 million people, mostly Jews, will be gassed there and their bodies burned. At one camp, Auschwitz, 1.6 million will be killed, making it the largest graveyard in human history.

In the summer, Jews from France, Holland, and Poland begin to be deported to camps. Ghettos are emptied. Jews are herded into boxcars, told they are to be “resettled for work in the East.” Many die on the way to the camps. Upon arrival, the prisoners are “selected.” A small percentage of able-bodied men and women determined to be fit for work are chosen for brutal, and often deadly, slave labor. Many of them will die of starvation and disease. The rest—including all Jewish prisoners were forced to unload and burn the bodies.

After they were gassed, millions of people wound up here, in the ovens of concentration camps. Crews of Jewish prisoners were forced to unload and burn the bodies.
Prisoners at the Dachau concentration camp in Germany cheer American soldiers who liberated the camp on April 29, 1945. The soldiers were horrified by the conditions they found.

Some concentration camps are evacuated and hundreds of thousands of prisoners are marched to other camps within Germany. Tens of thousands die of exhaustion. Anyone who falls or stumbles is shot. One group is forced into a barn and burned alive.

**1945:** In January, as the Soviet Army approaches, Auschwitz is evacuated and 58,000 prisoners are sent on a "death march." With defeat pending, the Nazis frantically kill as many prisoners as possible. In some cases, as liberating troops approach a camp, the guards slaughter everyone to eliminate witnesses.

On April 30, Hitler commits suicide. On May 7, Germany surrenders.

**THE AFTERMATH**

**1945:** Liberating troops are horrified by what they find in the concentration camps. The Nazis and their allies have killed 6 million Jews, two-thirds of the Jewish population of Europe, and millions of other innocent civilians.

In October, the trial of Nazi leaders begins in Nuremburg, Germany, for war crimes and crimes against humanity. Dozens of Nazi leaders are sentenced to death, while hundreds of underlings receive lighter sentences. Many SS officials, with the help of the Vatican, flee to safety in Argentina and elsewhere.

**1948:** On May 14, the State of Israel is established by the United Nations as a Jewish national homeland. The Israelis adopt a national anthem called "Hope," and an unofficial motto: "Never again."


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children and elderly—will be gassed immediately.

By now, word of the mass killings of Jews has reached the outside world. In December, the U.S., Britain, and the Soviet Union issue a statement condemning "this bestial policy of extermination," but take no action to rescue the Jews.

**1943:** Germany takes over most of Italy and immediately begins to deport Italian Jews to their deaths. The Vatican in Italy, the world headquarters of the Catholic Church, remains silent.

The ultimate goal of extermination is top secret. Jews are told that they are being sent to work camps. Some Jews are forced to write letters back to the ghetto, reassuring their communities that the work is hard but they are well. They are told to pack suitcases for the trip. Occasionally, an escaped prisoner returns to the ghetto to tell the Jews what is really happening, but usually is not believed.

In April, German plans to liquidate the Warsaw ghetto in Poland meet one of the war's most valiant resistance efforts. Warsaw Jews had smuggled in weapons, dug underground bunkers, and made explosives. When the Germans try to evacuate the ghetto, they are forced to retreat several times and suffer hundreds of casualties. Only after nearly a month of fighting do the Germans manage to take the ghetto. In all, revolts occur in 20 ghettos and five concentration camps.

In Bermuda, Britain and the U.S. hold a conference to discuss the refugee problem in light of the revelations of genocide. Again, nothing is done.

In October, Denmark, ordered to turn over its Jews for deportation, smuggles them in fishing boats to refuge in Sweden.

**GASSINGS ACCELERATE**

**1944:** Germany invades Hungary and begins deportation of 380,000 Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz. Despite detailed intelligence and photographs of Auschwitz, England and the U.S. refuse to bomb the camp.

As Allied forces begin to liberate parts of Europe, the Nazis step up the killings.