

# A VERY Brief Introduction to the Holocaust

Adapted from 1996 Teacher Created Materials, Inc. #559: Anne Frank

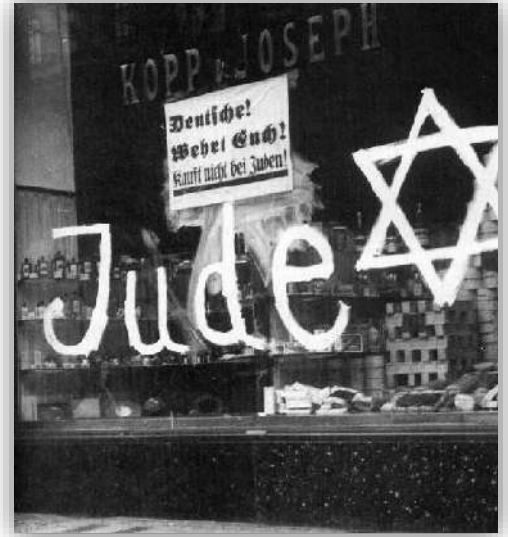
The word **holocaust** means total destruction, typically by fire. Since World War II, it has earned a new meaning: the systematic massacre of six million Jews by the German Nazis. Hitler's main goal was to exterminate all the Jews in Europe, and he succeeded in killing two-thirds of them before he ended his own life with poison in his bunker under the German Chancellery building.

The Holocaust began as soon as Hitler took power. Between 1933 and 1939 the Nazis boycotted Jewish businesses, established quotas in the professions and schools, outlawed marriages between Jews and Gentiles (non-Jewish persons), and built Dachau, Buchenwald, and Oranienburg—the first concentration camps. On the night of 9 November 1938, Hitler's Storm Troopers went set out to intimidate, burning 267 synagogues, arresting 20,000 people, and destroying Jewish places of worship, business, and livelihood, committing murder and human rights violations throughout Germany and Austria. The night of destruction and terror was deemed **Kristallnacht**, "the Night of Broken Glass." The Nazis then forced the Jews to pay an "atonement" fine equivalent to \$400 million for the damage done by the government to the Jews' property, including repayment of the gasoline to burn down the synagogues.

World War II began for Europe in September 1939. (The United States did not enter the war until December 1941). After Germany conquered Poland, Holocaust architect Reinhard Heydrich decreed that all Polish Jews were to be confined in a **ghetto**. Seven hundred thousand of them died during the next two years. When Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June of 1941, "strike squads" consisting of German soldiers and Soviet Police and volunteers were sent in against Soviet-Jewish citizens. In one atrocity alone, on 29 September 1941, 33,771 Jews were machine-gunned down. The emotional fallout from these experiences led to the desire for a systematic means of killing, and the first extermination camps were conceived.

In January 1942, Hitler called the **Wannsee Conference** to debate what he called the "final solution of the Jewish question." As a result, during the next three years, Jews represented over half of those exterminated in the concentration camps. Romani (Roma), Slavs, and political prisoners made up most of the rest. Several camps, including **Auschwitz**, were actually extermination or "death" camps built solely to kill people as quickly and effectively as possible. The Nazis were proud of their efficiency in murder, and their methods included cyanide or carbon monoxide gas, electrocution, and phenol injections.

The concentration camps have come to stand for the worst action that humans are capable of doing against another. They utterly debased and depersonalized the captives, treating them as though they were not people at all, crowding them onto cattle cars, as many as a hundred to a car, where they would often



die due to exposure and be forced to travel amongst corpses. They would be carried to the camps in such conditions, often without water, food, or sanitary facilities. They abused them physically and verbally in the worst ways imaginable, and split up families, sending men and boys to one place and women and girls to another. In **Auschwitz** the infamous Dr. Mengele would decide with one glance who would live, die, and be experimented on.

Everything they owned—money, clothing, books, jewelry, even their hair and the gold fillings of their teeth—was taken from them. They slept on wooden shelves which served as beds, without blankets or pillows crowded so closely together they could not turn over in their sleep.

If not killed immediately, they were forced to work as slave laborers until they could no longer function and then they were killed. They were called by numbers which were tattooed on their arms. Hundreds of thousands died of typhus or other terrible diseases which flourish when people are forced to live together in unsanitary conditions. Thousands of whole families were wiped out.

Those killed included men, women, children, babies, the elderly, and the handicapped. They included doctors, teachers, librarians, lawyers, business owners, store clerks, housewives, students, farmers, writers, and secretaries. People from every walk of life were killed, regardless of who they were, how wealthy or how poor they were, or how good or how bad they were. They were all the same to those who ran the government and camps.

### **Breakdown of deaths in camps**

(<https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10008193>) :

<b>Persons</b>	<b>Number</b>
Jews	Over 6 million
Soviet Civilians	Around 7 million (incl. 1.3 million Soviet Jews)
Soviet Prisoners of War	3 million (incl. 50,000 Jewish soldiers)
Non-Jewish Polish Civilians	1.8 million
Serb civilians	312,000
People with disabilities living in institutions	Upwards of 250,000
Romani	196,000–220,000
“Asocials”	70,000–80,000