

Auschwitz

Not long ago. Not far away.

MCHE Frequently Asked Questions

What is the Holocaust?

The Holocaust was the state-sponsored, systematic, intentional murder of approximately 6 million European Jews – including 1.5 million Jewish children – by the Germans, their allies and collaborators between 1933 and 1945. When Germany surrendered on May 8, 1945 and the genocide stopped, fully two thirds of Europe’s Jews – or one third of world Jewry – were dead.

Why is the Holocaust unique?

Although Jews were the primary victims in the Holocaust, others were caught up in the machinery designed for the Jews. These groups included Roma and Sinti, Russians and Poles, political and cultural dissidents, Jehovah’s Witnesses, the mentally and physically disabled, and lesbians, gays, other queer victims. Millions of soldiers and civilians also died fighting the Germans. However, it is important to understand that the Holocaust was a destruction process in which the Germans targeted for death every person who was Jewish or whom they defined as Jewish without exception. The Holocaust is additionally unique in its industrial scale and method of murder as well as its scope in pursuing victims across an entire continent.

How did the world respond to the Holocaust?

The Nazis could not have accomplished the murder of two-thirds of European Jewry and the destruction of 1500 years of Jewish culture, community and history in the space of twelve years without the complicity of others. Such complicity included not only those who collaborated with them, but also those who remained neutral or indifferent, and those who kept silent.

Allies and Neutrals: In the 1930s, despite widespread press coverage of the persecution of German Jewry, the United States, Great Britain, and other countries, influenced by antisemitism and the fear of a flood of refugees, were unwilling to change their immigration policies. By 1942, despite confirmed reports about the “Final Solution,” they argued that defeating Germany took precedence over rescue efforts, and so they made no large-scale attempts to stop or slow the destruction process. Neutral countries like Sweden and Switzerland were indifferent to the Jews’ plight either because trade with Germany was benefitting their economies or because – until 1943 – they believed Germany would win the war. And Pope Pius XII refrained from public condemnation of German policy not only because he considered communism a greater threat than Nazism, but also because he feared that speaking out would lead to German occupation and possible destruction of the Vatican.

How did non-Jews in occupied Europe respond or participate in the Holocaust?

Non-Jewish response to German policy toward the Jews can be divided into five broad demographic categories or groups:

Perpetrators, who crafted, implemented, and directly benefited from German policies.

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Collaborators, who assisted the perpetrators and also benefited from German policies.

Resisters, who actively opposed and worked to undermine German policies.

Rescuers, who actively sought to protect members of groups targeted by German policies – primarily Jews.

Bystanders, who, proceeded with their own lives...not completely oblivious to what was happening to their Jewish neighbors, but oddly uninvolved, as though it had nothing to do with them.

Did non-Jews act as rescuers and resisters?

Demographically, rescuers made up less than .5 of 1% of occupied Europe's total population. Resisters were a somewhat larger group. However, most non-Jews in occupied Europe remained bystanders. And while the Germans could not have murdered two-thirds of European Jewry and destroyed 1500 years of Jewish community, culture and history in the space of twelve years without the active complicity of perpetrators and collaborators – thousands of them – what they really counted on was the silence of millions of bystanders.

How did the Jews respond to the Holocaust?

For European Jews, life was a ceaseless confrontation with death. The Holocaust presented a situation for which no historical or contemporary experience could have prepared them. Previous regimes either did not target every Jew for annihilation or did not have the resources to implement such a goal as systematically as the Nazis. Moreover, as late as mid-1942, most Jews were unaware that the "Final Solution" was even being planned: either because they had no concrete knowledge of death camps and mass murder or because, unable to believe that such atrocities could take place in the 20th century, they dismissed the information as rumor and propaganda. Without allies or support networks, facing starvation and disease, responsible for parents and siblings, wives and children, they believed what they were told – that they were going to be "resettled" to work. The reality did not sink in until it was too late.

Individuals everywhere struggled to stay alive and to keep their loved ones alive. They also attempted evasive or confrontational responses: jumping from trains, seeking refuge in the attics, cellars, and closets of non-Jews, or attacking their captors.

In the ghettos, they kept the community intact by running soup kitchens, hospitals, and orphanages and sponsoring cultural and educational events. They kept diaries and journals, took photographs and drew pictures, and maintained secret archives.

They organized armed revolts in ghettos, concentration camps, and even in the death camps, and formed Jewish partisan units in the forests. Although they were a small minority, the fact they existed at all is remarkable.

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Why do some people deny the Holocaust has happened?

Holocaust deniers call themselves “Revisionists,” to pretend to a scholarly “objectivity” in their so-called “research.” However, they are actually pseudo-historians, cloaking themselves in respectability to find a wider audience for their antisemitic and anti-democratic propaganda. They represent neo-Nazi, neo-fascists, and other hate groups who want to erase the memory of Nazi Germany’s crimes and atrocities. To counter such hate and to help ensure that the future will be marked by understanding and mutual respect, the Midwest Center for Holocaust Education and other Holocaust centers throughout the world dedicate themselves to bringing the truth of the Holocaust, its relevance, and its implications to our children, our fellow citizens, and our communities.

<https://mchekc.org/holocaust-history/faq/>

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