

# "AND THEN THEY CAME FOR ME..."

(Image: The National WWII Museum, 2014.057.036\_1.)

Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party's rise to power in Germany ushered in an era of attacks against people Hitler deemed undesirable. Jews living across Europe became the primary target of Nazi hatred and violence. Attacks against other groups of people—such as individuals with mental or physical disabilities, political prisoners, Romani, Soviet citizens and prisoners of war, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people, Slavs, and Jehovah's Witnesses—also became a part of the Nazi program to "purify" German society. Those who did not fit within Nazi standards of a "master race" faced capture and horrific brutality in the attempted **genocide** now known as the Holocaust. From 1939 to 1941, the Nazis steadily took steps toward a formal policy of extermination. Known as the **Final Solution**, this policy spread to each region that fell under Nazi rule throughout World War II.

Anti-Semitism had been present throughout Europe for centuries, peaking during times of upheaval, such as the Crusades or outbreaks of plague. This historical precedent perpetuated hateful stereotypes that again resurfaced in the era of upheaval that followed Germany's defeat in World War I. While anti-Semitism had been limited to fringe political groups, the rising popularity of the Nazi Party helped promote ideas of segregating and removing the Jewish population from the region. While not all Germans actively supported the anti-Semitic attacks taken by the Nazis, many adopted an attitude of indifference toward the treatment of their Jewish neighbors.

Hitler and the Nazi Party actively encouraged this indifference, and through the use of anti-Semitic propaganda forcibly taught in schools and printed in newspapers, Germans increasingly looked away as the number of attacks on Jewish communities rose. Some even assisted in seeking out and betraying Jewish families who went into hiding. This pattern of behavior affected Jewish families such as Anne Frank, her family, and four others who joined the Franks while hiding in Nazi-occupied Amsterdam. Similarly, Eva Schloss, who lived near and was childhood friends with Anne Frank, remembered her own family's betrayal by a nurse posing as a member of the Dutch Resistance. This nurse pretended to help Jews find

Land	Zahl
A. Altreich	131.800
Ostmark	43.700
Ostgebiete	420.000
Generalgouvernement	2.284.000
Bialystok	400.000
Protektorat Böhmen und Mähren	74.200
Estland	
Letland	3.500
Litauen	34.000
Belgien	43.000
Dänemark	5.600
Frankreich / Besetztes Gebiet	165.000
Unbesetztes Gebiet	700.000
Griechenland	69.600
Niederlande	160.800
Norwegen	1.300
B. Bulgarien	48.000
England	330.000
Finnland	2.300
Irland	4.000
Italien einschl. Sardinien	58.000
Albanien	200
Kroatien	40.000
Portugal	3.000
Rumänien einschl. Bessarabien	342.000
Schweden	8.000
Schweiz	18.000
Serbien	10.000
Slowakei	88.000
Spanien	6.000
Türkei (europ. Teil)	55.500
Ungarn	742.800
UdSSR	5.000.000
Ukraine	2.994.684
Weißrussland aus- schl. Bialystok	446.484
Zusammen: über	11.000.000

List of Jewish populations by country created by Adolf Eichmann for use at the Wannsee Conference in 1942. (Image: Wikimedia Commons.)

## ONLINE RESOURCES

ww2classroom.org

- ▶ Eva Schloss Oral History
- ▶ Harold Berkman Oral History



Nazi soldiers round up Jews for arrest during the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.  
(Image: National Archives and Records Administration, 6003996.)

a safe hiding place, and as she did so, she fed information about their location to the Nazis.

In January 1942, at the Wannsee Conference held in Berlin, Reinhard Heydrich, Chief of the Reich Main Security Office, presented a plan for the complete extermination of European Jews. This planned “**Final Solution**” was set to occur in camps constructed for the purpose of facilitating mass murder. Heydrich decided German-occupied Poland was the ideal location for these death camps. While the Wannsee Conference signifies the moment in which the Nazi Party officially adopted the **Final Solution**, efforts to exterminate Jews across Europe, especially in the East, were already well underway, and the construction of death camps had already begun. Heinrich Himmler, Head of the *Schutzstaffel*, oversaw enforcement of the **Final Solution** and tasked Adolf Eichmann to manage the logistics of

the deportations to the ghettos and death camps. In a speech delivered in October 1943, Himmler claimed the Holocaust was a “moral right” and “a page of glory in our history which is never to be written.”

Through this official policy of extermination, the Nazis organized a system of mass murder that claimed the lives of over six million people based on their Jewish identity alone. Nazi demands for a “master race” also led to more than twelve million additional deaths, placing the estimated number of victims around eighteen million, although specific numbers are difficult to know. The camp system allowed Nazis to move millions of people into forced labor and death camps across occupied territories. The deadliest of these camps was the Auschwitz complex, which included Birkenau and other subcamps. Around one million people died at the Auschwitz complex



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alone. Altogether, the Nazis established six death camps that collectively became the site of over three million deaths.

Nazi attacks against European Jews did not remain a secret to the outside world. Before the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, Herman Neugass, a Jewish track star from Tulane University, refused to compete in protest of Nazi anti-Semitism. In 1935, *The Washington Post* criticized the Nuremberg Laws that denied Jews citizenship, marriage to non-Jews, and the ability to participate in public life. Following the adoption of the **Final Solution**, Gerhart M. Riegner, Secretary of the World Jewish Congress in Geneva, sent a telegram in 1942 to both the United Kingdom and United States with information about the ongoing **genocide** against European Jews. After Allied intelligence confirmed the legitimacy of the telegram, news reached the US press in November 1942. As word spread, Jewish communities in Western countries declared December 2, 1942, an international day of mourning. Synagogues across the US held special services, and thousands of Jewish residents marched in New York City to draw attention to the atrocities of the Holocaust. In spite of the growing attention, a sense of doubt persisted among American and British leaders who believed the accounts of Nazi death camps were too extreme to be true. Until American forces witnessed the camps firsthand, many American leaders saw the shocking news about the camps as a product of Soviet propaganda.

## LIBERATION AND FALLOUT

Liberation from Nazi camps came in an uneven wave, initially from the East, as Soviet forces were the first to reach concentration camps, and then from the West, as American and British soldiers closed in on Berlin. The experience of liberation was similarly uneven. Allied soldiers were stunned by the horror they encountered. For Harold Berkman, who helped liberate Buchenwald on April 11, 1945, walking into the camp was a traumatic experience. He remembered that day, stating, “When I walked into Buchenwald... the ovens were still warm. The inmates were 70 pounds, 75 pounds, undernourished. I saw bones where the furnaces were stacked high, and that’s another thing you never forget.” For the prisoners, liberation did not come with a bold stroke, but instead stretched over weeks, months, and even years. Hadassah Rosensaft, who was liberated from Bergen-Belsen, described what that fateful date felt like when it finally arrived, saying, “There was joy, yes—we were free, the gates were open—but where were we to go? The liberation had come too late, not only for the dead, but for us, the living, as well.”

As survivors faced the daunting challenge of returning to life after suffering years of trauma, the rest of the world came to see what occurred inside the Nazi camps. Careful documentation kept by the Nazis themselves, including photographs, written records, and film, showed in explicit detail what occurred. This evidence was put on public display following the liberation of the camps. US generals ordered civilians living in nearby towns who claimed ignorance of what had happened to tour the camps and confront the carnage. The scale of mass murder was such that Raphael Lemkin, a Polish Jewish lawyer, created a new term to describe what occurred to European Jews under Nazi rule. Taking *geno-* from the Greek word for ‘race’ or ‘tribe,’ and *-cide* from the Latin word for ‘to kill,’ Lemkin created the term **genocide** in 1944. The following year, the International Military Tribunal trying war criminals at Nuremberg included the term in the indictment.

The Holocaust forced nations across the globe to redefine the meaning of justice; the same also became true for the protection of human rights. The new United Nations (UN), formed in the final months of World War II, took on the issue of human rights in December 1948, adopting Resolution 217, also known as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The idea for such a declaration existed in the years before the war ended. A speech delivered by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in January 1941 introduced the idea of the Four Freedoms—freedom of speech, freedom to worship, freedom from fear, and freedom from want. The **Charter** of the UN reaffirmed the protection of these freedoms, as well as the “fundamental human rights... the dignity and worth of the human person.” However, what human rights were exactly still required clarification. In response, a committee chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt drafted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Eleanor incorporated the idea of the Four Freedoms introduced by her late husband into this declaration, and on December 10, 1948, the UN approved Resolution 217, which included 30 articles outlining an individual’s rights, and prohibitions against slavery and torture.

The truth about the Holocaust forever changed the world. With many lacking homes to return to and Allied nations ill-prepared to take in postwar refugees, the UN approved the creation of a new state of Israel on May 29, 1948. As the world confronted the devastation left at the end of World War II, people everywhere struggled to comprehend the scale of bloodshed caused by the ideology of the Nazi Party. In spite of the overwhelming devastation of the Holocaust, people the world over could no longer look away. General Dwight D. Eisenhower commented on the horrors of the Holocaust, stating people had a responsibility to face such difficult histories, lest any effort arises to dismiss the atrocities or deny its truth.



Concentration camp prisoners in liberated Dachau.  
(Image: The National WWII Museum, 2009.373.054\_1.)