

The Holocaust

READING FOCUS

- In what ways did Germany persecute Jews in the 1930s?
- How did Germany's policies toward Jews develop from murder into genocide?

MAIN IDEA

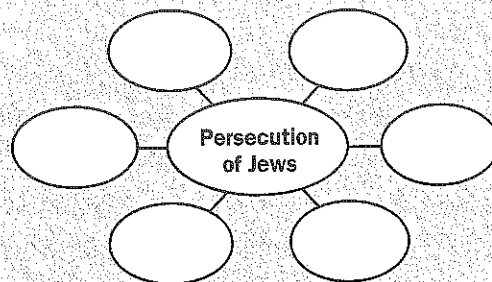
During World War II, the Nazis carried out a brutal plan that resulted in the deaths of 6 million Jews and millions of other victims.

KEY TERMS

anti-Semitism
 Holocaust
 concentration camp
Kristallnacht
 Warsaw ghetto
 Wannsee Conference
 genocide
 death camp
 War Refugee Board (WRB)
 Nuremberg Trials

TAKING NOTES

Copy the web diagram below and fill in the circles with examples of German persecution of Jews.



Setting the Scene Jews in Europe faced persecution for their religious beliefs for centuries. In the mid-1800s, a new form of anti-Jewish prejudice arose based on racial theories. Some thinkers claimed that Germanic peoples whom they called “Aryans” were superior to Middle Eastern peoples called Semites. Semitic peoples included Arabs and Jews, but the term often applied only to Jews.

Although most scholars rejected those theories, others used them to justify the continued persecution of “non-Aryans.” By the 1880s, the term **anti-Semitism** was used to describe discrimination or hostility, often violent, directed at Jews. Despite the rise of anti-Semitism, most European countries repealed old anti-Jewish laws between the mid-1800s and World War I.

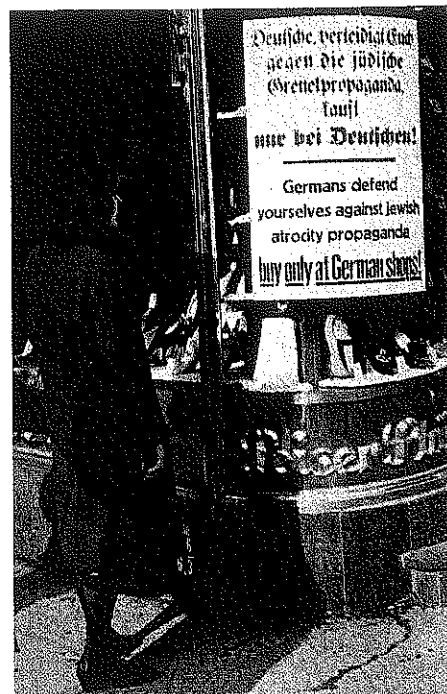
The suffering caused by World War I and the hardships of the Great Depression led many to look for someone to blame for their problems. Using old theories of anti-Semitism to pin blame on the Jews helped many Germans to regain national pride and a sense of purpose. In *Mein Kampf*, Adolf Hitler revived the idea of Aryan superiority and expressed an especially hateful view of Jews. In particular, he despised the mixing of the two “races”:

“Let the desolation which Jewish hybridization daily visits on our nation be clearly seen, this blood-poisoning that can be removed from our body national only after centuries or nevermore; let it be pondered, further, how racial decay drags down, indeed often annuls, the final Aryan values of our German nation. . . .”

—Adolf Hitler, from *Mein Kampf*, 1925

Persecution in Germany

When Hitler became Germany's leader in 1933, he made anti-Semitism the official policy of the nation. No other persecution of Jews in modern history equals the extent and brutality of the **Holocaust**, Nazi Germany's systematic murder of European Jews. In all, some six million Jews, about two thirds of Europe's



Building upon historic anti-Semitism, the Nazis planned to exclude Jews from all areas of German life. A sign turns away shoppers from a Jewish-owned store during the April 1, 1933, boycott.

READING CHECK

What was the goal of Nazi persecution of Jews in the mid-1930s?

VIEWING HISTORY At bottom, a Jewish shopkeeper sweeps up shop windows left shattered by *Kristallnacht*. Below, the "J" stamp on this girl's identification paper identifies her as Jewish. **Synthesizing Information** In what other ways did the Nazis organize the persecution of the Jews?



Jewish population, would lose their lives. Some 5 to 6 million other people would also die in Nazi captivity.

Nazi Policies Early Nazi persecution aimed to exclude Germany's Jews from all aspects of the country's political, social, and economic life. On April 1, 1933, the Nazis ordered a one-day boycott of businesses owned by Jews. In 1935, the Nuremberg laws stripped Jews of their German citizenship, and outlawed marriage between Jews and non-Jews. Nazi-controlled newspapers and radio constantly attacked and caricatured Jews as enemies of Germany.

In 1938, the Nazis enacted new policies to make life even more difficult for the Jewish people. Most Jews had already lost their jobs. The Nazis now forced Jews to surrender their own businesses to Aryans for a fraction of their value. Jewish doctors and lawyers were forbidden to serve non-Jews, and Jewish students were expelled from public schools.

A Jew was defined as any person who had three or four Jewish grandparents, regardless of his or her current religion, as well as any person who had two Jewish grandparents and practiced the Jewish religion. At the request of Switzerland, the destination of many refugees, the Nazis marked Jews' identity cards with a red letter "J." The Nazis also gave Jews new middle names—"Sarah" for women and "Israel" for men—which appeared on all documents. Eventually, Jews in Germany and German-occupied countries were forced to sew yellow stars marked "Jew" on their clothing. These practices exposed Jews to public attacks and police harassment.

Hitler's Police When Hitler first came to power, the Gestapo, Germany's new secret state police, was formed to identify and pursue enemies of the Nazi regime. Hitler also formed the SS, or *Schutzstaffel*, an elite guard that developed into the private army of the Nazi party. By 1939, the Gestapo had become part of the SS.

The duties of the SS included guarding the **concentration camps**, or places where political prisoners are confined, usually under harsh conditions. In addition to Communists, the Nazi camps soon held many other classes of people whom they considered "undesirable"—mainly Jews, but also homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Gypsies, and the homeless.

Kristallnacht Despite the ever-increasing restrictions on their lives, many Jews believed they could endure persecution until Hitler lost power. Older people believed staying in Germany was safer than starting a new life with no money in a foreign country. Their illusions were destroyed on the night of November 9, 1938, when Nazi thugs throughout Germany and Austria looted and destroyed Jewish stores, houses, and synagogues.

This incident became known as **Kristallnacht**, or "Night of the Broken Glass," a reference to the broken windows of the Jewish shops. Nearly every synagogue was destroyed. The Nazis arrested thousands of Jews that night and shipped them off to concentration camps. These actions were followed by an enormous fine to make Jews pay for the damage of *Kristallnacht*. After that night, Germany's remaining Jews sought any means possible to leave the country.

Refugees Seek an Escape From 1933 through 1937, about 130,000 Jews, or one in four, fled Germany with Nazi encouragement. At first, most refugees moved to neighboring European nations. As the numbers grew, however, Jews began to seek protection in the United States, Latin America,

and British-ruled Palestine. Few countries, however, welcomed Jewish refugees as long as the Depression prevented their own citizens from finding work.

Responding to criticism, President Roosevelt called for an international conference to discuss the growing numbers of Jewish refugees. The Evian Conference, held in France in July 1938, failed to deal with the situation. With the exception of the Dominican Republic, each of the 32 nations represented, including the United States, refused to open its doors to more immigrants.

From Murder to Genocide

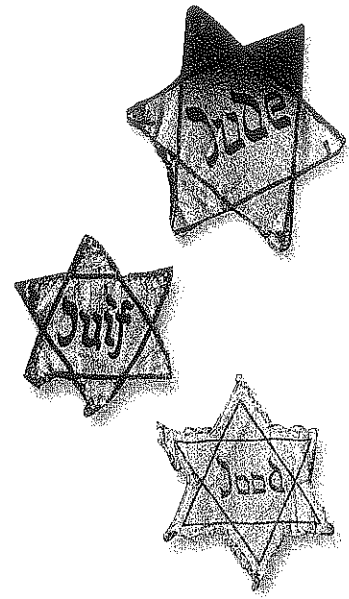
As German armies overran most of Europe, more and more Jews, including many who had fled Germany, came under their control. In 1939, for example, the invasion of Poland brought some 2 million additional Jews under German control. Nazi plans for dealing with these Jews included the establishment of ghettos, self-contained areas, usually surrounded by a fence, wall, or armed guards, where Jews were forced to live. In Warsaw, the Nazis rounded up more than 400,000 Jews, about 30 percent of the Polish capital's population, and confined them in an area that was less than 3 percent of the entire city. They sealed off the **Warsaw ghetto** with a wall topped with barbed wire and guarded by Germans. Jews received little food, and hunger, overcrowding, and a lack of sanitation brought on disease. Each month, thousands of Jews died in the ghetto. The Nazis, however, sought more efficient ways of killing Jews.

The Einsatzgruppen During the invasion of the Soviet Union, Hitler ordered *Einsatzgruppen*, or mobile killing squads, to shoot Communist political leaders as well as all Jews in German-occupied territory. Typically, they rounded up their victims, drove them to gullies or freshly dug pits, and shot them. In a ravine called Babi Yar outside Kiev, the Nazis killed more than 33,000 Jews in two days.

Although Hitler considered mass murder by firing squad acceptable in a war zone, he found the method unsuitable for the conquered nations of western and central Europe. In January 1942, Nazi officials met at the **Wannsee Conference** outside Berlin to agree on a new approach. They developed a plan to achieve what one Nazi leader called the "final solution to the Jewish question." Ultimately, the plan would lead to the construction of special camps in Poland where **genocide**, or the deliberate destruction of an entire ethnic or cultural group, was to be carried out against Europe's Jewish population.

The Death Camps The Nazis chose poison gas as the most effective way to kill people. A pesticide called Zyklon B proved to be the most efficient killer. In January 1942, the Nazis opened a specially designed gas chamber disguised as a shower room at the Auschwitz camp in western Poland. The Nazis outfitted six such camps in Poland. Unlike concentration camps, which functioned as prisons and centers of forced labor, these **death camps** existed primarily for mass murder.

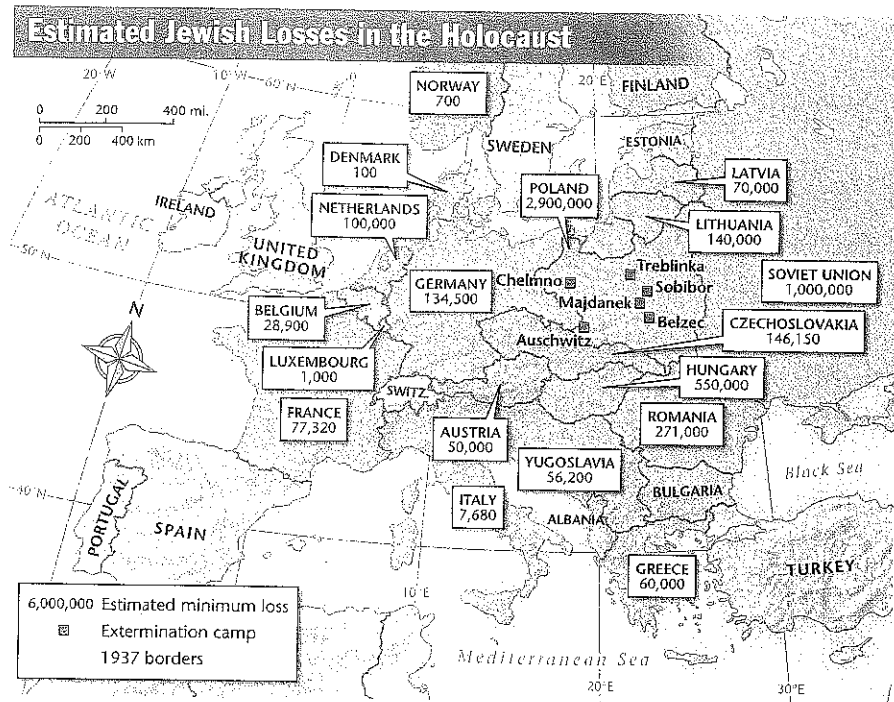
Jews in Poland, the Netherlands, Germany, and other lands were crowded into train cars built for cattle and transported to these extermination centers. Most of them were told they were going to "the East" to work. At four of the six death camps, nearly all were murdered soon after they arrived. On arrival at the two largest camps, Auschwitz and Majdanek, prisoners were organized into a line and quickly inspected. The elderly, women with children, and those who looked too weak to work were herded into gas chambers and killed. Jewish



VIEWING HISTORY The Nazis forced Jews to wear armbands or bright yellow stars marked "Jew" in Germany (top), in occupied lands, including France (center), and in the Netherlands (bottom). Jews caught without a star were deported or killed. **Predicting Consequences** Why did the stars make life more difficult for Jews?

Focus on WORLD EVENTS

Rescue in Denmark One country managed to save almost its entire Jewish community from destruction during the war. In October 1943, Danish fishermen secretly ferried nearly all of Denmark's 8,000 Jews across the water to neutral Sweden. A German official had alerted the Danish resistance that the Jews were about to be deported. Denmark's success was as rare as it was remarkable. Rescue was much more difficult in countries where the Jewish population was much greater than in Denmark, where the non-Jewish population was unwilling to help, or where there was no safe haven nearby.



MAP SKILLS The horror of the Holocaust touched many nations in Europe. **Place** Which country do you think was most altered by the Holocaust?

Jews in the Lodz ghetto in Poland board a train for deportation to the Chelmno death camp. The Germans seized the Jews' belongings and did not tell the deportees where they were going.



prisoners carried the dead to the crematoria, or huge ovens where the bodies were burned.

Those who were selected for work endured almost unbearable conditions. The life expectancy of a Jewish prisoner at Auschwitz was a few months. Men and women alike had their heads shaved and a registration number tattooed on their arms. They were given one set of clothes and slept in crowded, unheated barracks on hard wooden pallets. Their daily food was usually a cup of imitation coffee, a small piece of bread, and thin, foul-tasting soup made with rotten vegetables. Diseases swept through the camps and claimed many who were weakened by harsh labor and starvation. Others died from torture or from

cruel medical experiments. At periodic "selections," German overseers sent weak prisoners to the gas chambers.

The number of people killed in the labor and death camps is staggering. At Auschwitz, the main Nazi killing center, 12,000 victims could be gassed and cremated in a single day. There the Nazis killed as many as 1.5 million people, some 90 percent of them Jews.

Fighting Back Some Jews resisted the Nazis. In Poland, France, and elsewhere, Jews joined underground resistance groups. Jews in several ghettos and camps took part in violent uprisings. In August 1943, rioting Jews damaged the Treblinka death camp so badly that it had to be closed. However, uprisings often came too late to save many people, and they were quickly crushed by the Germans.

Escape was the most common form of resistance. Most attempts failed, and most of those who escaped were later caught, but a few people managed to bring word of the death camps to the outside world. After several prisoners escaped from Treblinka, word got back to the Warsaw ghetto about the fate of nearly 300,000 Jews from Warsaw who had been sent there in 1942. As a result, in April 1943, the approximately 50,000 Jews still in the Warsaw ghetto rose up against a final deportation to Treblinka. For some 27 days, Jews armed with little more

than pistols and homemade bombs held out against more than 2,000 Germans with tanks and artillery. Although the Germans defeated the rebellion, Warsaw's Jews had brought the deportation drive to a standstill, if only for a time.

Rescue and Liberation The United States government knew about the mass murder of Jews by the Nazis as early as November 1942. The press showed little interest in reporting the story. Congress did not raise immigration quotas, and even the existing quotas for Jews went unfilled.

Finally, in January 1944, over the objection of the State Department, Roosevelt created the **War Refugee Board (WRB)** to try to help people threatened by the Nazis. Despite

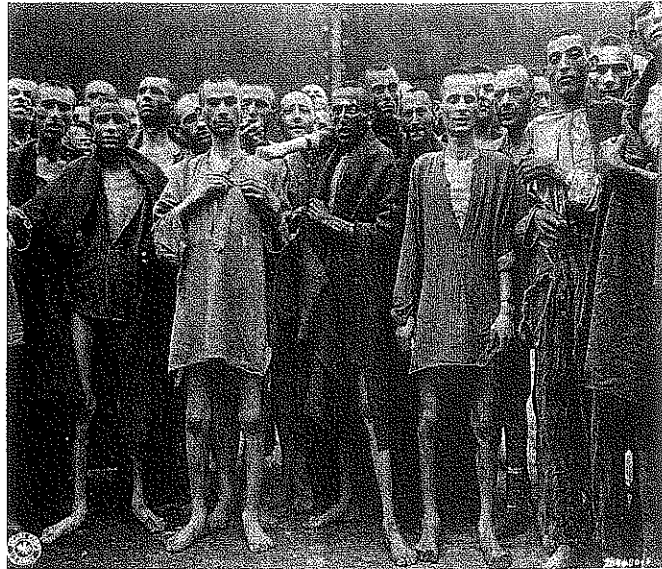
its late start, the WRB's programs helped save some 200,000 lives. With WRB funding, for example, Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg rescued thousands of Hungarian Jews by issuing them special Swedish passports. A WRB effort to bring Jews to the United States met with less success. Some 1,000 refugees were rescued and brought to an army camp in Oswego, New York, but Roosevelt would not expand the program.

As Allied armies advanced in late 1944, the Nazis abandoned the camps outside Germany and moved their prisoners to camps on German soil. On the eve of liberation, thousands of Jews died on death marches from camp to camp as their German guards moved them ahead of advancing armies. In 1945, American troops were able to witness the horrors of the Holocaust for the first time. A young soldier described the conditions he discovered as he entered the barracks at Buchenwald:

“The odor was so bad I backed up, but I looked at a bottom bunk and there I saw one man. He was too weak to get up; he could just barely turn his head. . . . He looked like a skeleton; and his eyes were deep set. He didn't utter a sound; he just looked at me with those eyes, and they still haunt me today.”

—Leon Bass, American soldier

Horrified by the death camps and by Germany's conduct during the war, the Allies placed a number of former Nazi leaders on trial. They charged them with crimes against peace, crimes against humanity, and war crimes. An International Military Tribunal composed of members selected by the United States, Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and France conducted the **Nuremberg Trials** in November 1945. Of the 24 Nazi defendants, 12 received the death sentence. More significant than the number of convictions, the trials established the important principle that individuals must be responsible for their own actions. The tribunal firmly rejected the Nazis' argument that they were only “following orders.”



VIEWING HISTORY The faces of these newly liberated prisoners reflect the starvation and horrors they experienced in a concentration camp in Ebensee, Austria.

Recognizing Cause and Effect
How did the liberation of the camps lead to the Nuremberg trials?

Section

3

Assessment

READING COMPREHENSION

1. Why was **Kristallnacht** a critical event for Jews living under Nazi control?
2. (a) What was the purpose of a **concentration camp**? (b) What was the purpose of a **death camp**?
3. How did the United States respond to news of the **Holocaust** during the war?

CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

4. **Identifying Central Issues** How did the Nazis implement their plans for genocide?
5. **Writing to Inform** Write a short paragraph from the point of view of a Jewish teenager living in the Warsaw Ghetto in 1942.



Take it to the NET

Activity: Virtual Field Trip Visit the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum online. Select one of the several online exhibits available and write an essay describing the exhibit's effectiveness. Use the links provided in the *America Pathways to the Present* area of the following Web site for help in completing this activity.

www.phschool.com