

Definition of the Holocaust

The Holocaust (or Shoah, Hebrew for “the great destruction”) was the government-sponsored, systematic persecution and annihilation of Jews in Europe and the former Soviet Union by Nazi Germany and its collaborators between 1933 and 1945. Approximately six million Jews were murdered in this ideological war within a war. Never before nor since has genocide been an obsessive governmental policy without concern for territorial, military, or economic advantage. Nazi ideology defined Jews as the demonic enemy of the world that had to be totally defeated and destroyed. In addition to the Holocaust, several other groups of civilians also suffered oppression, imprisonment, or death under Nazi tyranny before and during the Second World War: (1) political opponents, (2) the mentally and physically handicapped in Germany, (3) Germans who held to their beliefs as Jehovah’s Witnesses, (4) German male homosexuals, (5) Polish leaders (priests, professors, and politicians), and (6) the Roma and Sinti people or “Gypsies.”

Some Causes of the Holocaust

1. Centuries of Christian anti-Judaism (a theological prejudice developed by early Christians in order to distinguish Christianity from Judaism) served as a foundation or seedbed for Nazi antisemitism. But while the purpose of Christian anti-Judaism was to convert Jews to Christianity, the goal of Nazism was to eliminate Jews.
 2. 19th century “racist” antisemitism was based on pseudo-scientific theories that mistakenly defined Jews as a race. Jews were believed to be an economic parasite trying to take over the world. The late 19th century forgery called “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion” promoted this idea.
 3. A terrorist political party like the National Socialists (NAZI) German Workers’ Party became the government of Germany in 1933 because of (a) severe economic crises and the weak Weimar Republic between the end of the First World War and 1933, (b) the short history of democracy, and (c) the fear of communism spreading to Germany. The Nazis blamed Jews for the defeat of Germany in the First World War, for the spread of communism, and for the terrible economic and social conditions between the two world wars.
 4. Nazi “racial” antisemitism defined Jews as a satanic enemy of the world.
 5. Nazi ideology defined “the Aryan race” as the “master race” that was destined to control the world. It taught that Nazi Germany had the right to take as much land as it needed for the superior Aryans.
 6. The Nazis taught their racist ideas in the German schools, created the Hitler Youth organizations, spread their propaganda in the press, radio, and films, and created a police state.
 7. The Nazis developed a bureaucracy which blindly followed orders and the technology for carrying out mass murder.
 8. The indifference or silence of some world leaders concerning Nazi Germany’s treatment of European Jews. Except for a few notable examples, not many governments made the rescue of European Jews a priority.
 9. The silence of many Germans and other bystanders who refused to protest against anti-Jewish measures or get involved in protecting Jews because of either fear or indifference.
 10. The Second World War (which Nazi Germany started on September 1, 1939 when it invaded Poland and then proceeded to invade much of the rest of Europe and the former Soviet Union) served as a cover for genocide and persecution.
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Some Lessons of the Holocaust

1. “Never Again!”: the motto of the survivors of the Holocaust. According to Israeli Holocaust historian Yehuda Bauer, the Ten Commandments from the Torah are not enough. These three commandments should be added to the list:
 11. You, your children, and your children’s children shall never become perpetrators of mass murder or genocide.
 12. You, your children, and your children’s children shall never allow yourselves to become victims of mass murder or genocide.
 13. You, your children, and your children’s children shall never be passive onlookers to mass murder or genocide.
2. Prejudice can lead to genocide, especially when a powerless group of people is made a scapegoat during terrible economic and social times. Therefore, there is a need to teach and promote tolerance, understanding, cooperation, and appreciation of different ethnic and religious groups. This is a special responsibility of families, schools, governments, and the world’s religions.
3. People must speak out against the blasphemy of “historical revisionists” and neo-Nazi groups who deny that the Holocaust even happened.
4. An International Genocide Bureau and early warning systems need to be created in order to identify potential genocidal situations.
5. Nations need to enforce the “Responsibility to Protect” (R2P) principle that was formulated at the United Nations which says that every nation has the responsibility to protect the lives of every human being (not just their own citizens) within their borders. If a nation does not follow this principle, then the rest of the nations have the responsibility to intervene by various means.
6. In light of the prosecution of Nazis at Nuremberg after the Second World War, there is a need to support the permanent International Criminal Court (begun in 2002) that can arrest and prosecute individuals who are involved in genocide and crimes against humanity whenever national courts refuse or are unable to prosecute such individuals.

In her book Conscience and Courage: Rescuers of Jews During the Holocaust, Dr. Eva Fogelman divides rescue efforts in this way:

- 32% I. MORAL RESCUERS: Gentiles who rescued Jews because of conscience, saying 'it was the right thing to do.'
- 14% A. IDEOLOGICAL: decisions to rescue Jews based on ethics and a strong sense of justice.
---Irene Opdyke of Poland and many others
 - 12% B. RELIGIOUS: decisions to rescue Jews based on the Golden Rule, the commandment to 'love your neighbor as you love yourself,' and biblical stories like the Good Samaritan.
---Protestants like the Trocme family and other villagers of Le Chambon in southern France
---Catholic priests and nuns, especially in Italy and Poland
---Quakers and the Friends Service Committee rescue efforts
---Orthodox Christians, especially in Bulgaria
 - 6% C. EMOTIONAL: decisions based on compassion, especially in rescuing Jewish children.
- 28% II. JUDEOPHILES: Gentiles who rescued Jews because they had Jewish friends or admired Jews as a people.
- A. Some Gentile rescuers or protectors had Jewish friends since childhood; some Gentile rescuers or protectors were married to Jews.
 - B. After the Second World War, some rescuers or protectors married Jews they had rescued, some converted to Judaism, and some moved to Israel.
 - C. Oskar Schindler was initially motivated to rescue Jews because of his friendship with Itzhak Stern.
- 22% III. NETWORK RESCUERS: those Gentiles who were outraged by Nazi ideology and policies, and joined underground or secret organizations. Their early focus was on opposing Hitler's regime but later, rescue became part of their general resistance. Unlike moral and Judeophile rescuers, most network rescuers did not have personal relationships with those Jews whom they rescued.
- A. Many network rescuers forged papers, found shelters for Jews, obtained money, or escorted Jews across national borders.
 - B. Danish boat rescue to neutral Sweden.
 - C. Westerweel Group, led by Joop and his wife Will, in Rotterdam, Netherlands. This group printed false papers, helped Jews escape from internment camps, and led some Jewish children through France to neutral Spain, from where they were able to go to Palestine.
 - D. Zegota in Poland.
- 5% IV. CONCERNED PROFESSIONALS: doctors, nurses, social workers, and diplomats, for whom helping others was their job.
- A. Diplomats like Raoul Wallenberg of Sweden who provided protection papers for Hungarian Jews in Budapest, Sempo Sugihara of Japan who provided transit visas for Lithuanian Jews to go to China or Japan, and Aristides Sousa de Mendes of Portugal who provided visas for Jews in southern France to get to neutral countries.
 - B. Some doctors and nurses who hid Jews in rooms marked "Quarantine."
 - C. A few doctors who did surgery on Jewish males to hide circumcision or gave Jewish males certificates saying that their circumcision was done for purely medical reasons.
- 12% V. CHILDREN: Gentile children who helped rescue Jews because their families were rescuing Jews.
- A. These children were forced to keep secrets, lie, act as couriers or escorts, play with hidden Jewish children, or could not play with their Gentile friends for fear that they would expose the rescuing family.
 - B. Some rescuer parents risked their own children's lives in order to save Jews.
 - C. Many child rescuers chose health care or other helping careers when they became adults.

Dr. Fogelman emphasizes that whenever Nazis caught Gentiles helping Jews in any way, the rescuers or protectors and their families were very likely to be sent to a concentration camp, tortured, or, especially in Poland, shot or hung.

"In talking with rescuers from all kinds of different homes, I found that one quality above all others was emphasized time and again: a familial acceptance of people who were different. This value was the centerpiece of the childhood of rescuers and became the core from which their rescuer self evolved. From the earliest ages, rescuers were taught by their parents that people are inextricably linked to one another. No one person or group was better than any other. The conviction that all people, no matter how marginal, are of equal value was conveyed to children of both religious and nonreligious households. This acceptance and tolerance of differences was developed in various ways. Le Chambon villagers were descendants of the once-persecuted Huguenots, so that tolerance for other religions was a natural part of their culture." (p. 259)

"The ability to accept individuals who were different was so ingrained in those who ultimately became rescuers that the racist propaganda of the Third Reich had little effect. They were able to see Nazi claims of Jewish conspiracies as the grotesque lies that they were." (p. 260)

"The deeds of rescuers stand as much-needed models of moral behavior. Every child knows the name of Hitler, but how many know the name of Raoul Wallenberg?" (p. 303)