

The Holocaust *Essentials*

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Note to readers:

*This is one of three booklets on the Holocaust written by Paul Kopperman.
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The Holocaust: Essentials

Directed especially to public school students and more generally to readers who seek a brief introduction to the subject.

The Holocaust: What It Was -- Why It Was – Why It Is Remembered

Intended for a general readership. Somewhat more detailed, it is illustrated and is supplemented by readings.

Ashes and Smoke : The Holocaust In Its History

The most detailed and is designed for teachers, college students, and others who may desire a fuller study of the Holocaust, its background, and its implications. It is illustrated and a guide to readings and a list of resources for teachers are appended.

“Holocaust” is the name often given to the campaign of murder that cost the lives of about six million Jews during World War II. It was organized and carried through by the Nazis of Germany and by their allies and supporters almost throughout Europe. The Holocaust itself was mainly confined to the years 1941-45, but in order to understand how it could have happened it is necessary to start much further back and to review the course of the prejudice that prompted this act of genocide.

Background

Antisemitism, or prejudice against Jews, can be traced back thousands of years and has been common to many cultures. However, the type that led ultimately to the Holocaust primarily grew out of early Christianity. Almost from the moment that Christianity branched off from Judaism, there were angry accusations on both sides. Certainly the most devastating charge, however, was that Jews were responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus - because, according to the New Testament, a Jewish mob in Jerusalem had called for his execution. It soon became common for Christian authorities to claim that the guilt extended to all Jews, for all time. As both Judaism and Christianity spread into Europe, the two communities carried with them mutual hostility. Many early Christian leaders looked on Judaism as an unacceptable alternative to what they regarded as the “true” faith, and they also considered Jews to be rivals as they sought to convert pagan Europeans to Christianity. In fact, Jews did not seek converts to nearly the degree that Christians did, and partly for this reason Christianity soon became predominant in Europe. By 1000 almost all European nations were overwhelmingly Christian, and although there were Jewish communities to be found in

most regions, Jews always represented a small minority. Moreover, they were generally passive, neither seeking converts nor challenging government authority. Nevertheless, Antisemitism continued strong.

Christian animosity was translated into policy by the various churches, notably the church that was based in Rome (later to be known as Roman Catholic). This church was not more hostile to the Jews than were others, but it was easily the most important in shaping the Christian aspect of Europe. Early church policy on the Jews focused on removing Jewish influence over Christians and on limiting as much as possible interaction between the two groups. The holding of government offices by Jews, intermarriage, even conversation between Christians and Jews - all were condemned at various times. Individual bishops sought the elimination of Judaism within their dioceses, ordering that Jews either convert to Christianity or leave, and a council in Toledo in 638 took this policy to a national level, banishing from Spain all Jews who refused to be baptized. Papal policy, especially as put forward by Gregory I (pope, 590-604), tended to be more moderate. Gregory, whose influence was to be felt for centuries, stated that Jews should not be converted by force, but he approved of persecution.

From about 300 onward, the cause of Christianity benefited from the willingness of Christian rulers to work in cooperation with the church. One result of this alliance was an increase in persecution of the Jews. Government decrees imposed many penalties on Jews and persecution became a fact of life. Individual rulers went further, demanding that Jews convert and threatening death to those who refused.

Beyond the particular policies of church and state, there was the general theme: that Jews were the enemy of Christians and therefore must be dealt with harshly. In the late fourth century, John Chrysostom, patriarch of Constantinople, insisted that "it is incumbent upon all Christians to hate the Jews." Around 1450, another influential cleric, the Italian friar Giovanni da Capistrano, stated, "To fight the Jew is a duty of the Catholic, not a choice." The message had endured for more than a thousand years and had become fixed in the minds of countless Europeans. Not surprisingly, it encouraged violence. Jews were subjected to occasional mob assault during the centuries prior to 1000, but it seems rather to have been during the period 1000-1500 that large-scale violence became common.

Often events that spurred religious fervor in Christian Europe were the occasion for massacre. At the time of the First Crusade (1095-99), for example, crusaders and peasant mobs killed at least 30,000 Jews in France, Germany, and Hungary. Several later crusades were likewise accompanied by massacres of Jews.

Religious fanaticism was most dangerous when linked to nationalism. The Jews were looked on as outsiders, wherever they lived, and the more nationalism intensified, the more likely they were to face violence. In Spain, rising nationalist feeling, accompanied by religious bigotry, moved mobs to attack the Jews again and again during the Late Middle Ages (1300-1500). In the overall period, as many as 120,000 Spanish Jews lost their lives. Finally, in 1492, the Jews were expelled from Spain, as they earlier had been from England (1290), France (1306), and a number of towns and regions.

The growth of mob violence reflects the fact that Antisemitism had taken on a life of its own and could flourish with or without the encouragement of church and state. In fact, church and state continued to promote persecution and vilification of the Jews, perpetuating a situation that encouraged violence, but leading clerical and government officials seldom condoned mass assaults. However, violence against the Jews often took place even when church leaders and major government officials sought to prevent it. In 1096, a mob of crusaders and townspeople rose against the Jews of Mainz, and the bishop there offered the Jews protection in his own large residence. Nevertheless, the mob, as reported by a chronicler, "attacked the Jews in the hall with arrows and lances. Breaking the bolts and doors, they killed the Jews, about seven hundred in number, who in vain resisted the force and attack of so many thousands. They killed the women, also, and with their swords pierced tender children of whatever age or sex."

In this atmosphere of hatred, even the wildest rumors about the Jews were widely believed. During the period 1000-1500 a vast range of Antisemitic myths and stereotypes sprung up in Europe. One popular myth had it that Jews were horned. The belief probably grew from another: that Jews were children of the devil (who was thought to have horns). Other myths about the Jewish body - for example, that they were hunchbacked - also became common. These myths made Jews appear to be monstrous and magnified the fear and hatred of them.

Other myths portrayed the Jews as evil and dangerous. One, the "Blood Libel," had it

that Jews occasionally murdered Christian children and drank their blood. Versions of this legend had existed for centuries, but the myth gained prominence in the twelfth century. After it became popular, there were hundreds of cases of Jews, sometimes entire communities, being killed when some Christian child was found dead and the rumor arose that he had been murdered by them. The Blood Libel persisted into the twentieth century, despite the fact that from the beginning it was denounced as preposterous by some Christian authorities.

Another popular myth was that Jews sometimes stole the Host (a consecrated wafer, supposed to be the body of Jesus) and pierced it with knives or used it to parody the Mass. In 1298 a report that Jews in one German town had desecrated the Host prompted a nobleman named Rindfleisch to build an army and lead it through Austria and Bavaria, plundering and destroying Jewish communities as it went. Before the year was out, many thousands of Jews had perished. Although this was the worst violence to spring from a rumor of Host desecration, it was not the only mass assault.

Possibly the most pervasive charge was that Jews were a nation unto themselves and were hostile to the countries where they happened to reside. Building on this belief was the myth that Jews were conspiring to destroy Christian Europe. The most damaging early manifestation of the fear of an "international Jewish conspiracy" came in 1348-49. The Black Death (bubonic plague) was sweeping Europe at the time, killing millions, and the story spread that Jews had caused the outbreak. Rumor had it that Jewish leaders from all over Europe had met in Prague, and their chief had

given them vials of poison, with instructions that at a specified time they should empty the contents into the wells in their home districts, thereby causing a pestilence. Despite the fact that Jews themselves were dying from the plague in great numbers, and despite a papal pronouncement that they were innocent, the rumor was widely believed. Within months, mobs in Poland, Germany, and elsewhere slaughtered tens of thousands of Jews.

The demonization of Jews was promoted by rumor, exaggeration, and sheer myth. Hatred was woven into standard Christian prayers and hymns, and it was a common feature of sermons. Works of fiction, too, played their part in driving home the message. In societies that were predominantly illiterate, stage pieces had the greatest impact, for unlike printed literature they reached a mass audience. Crowds that may not have distinguished fact from fiction and were willing to believe the worst saw Jewish characters on stage admitting to evil deeds and promising worse to come.

The Reformation of the sixteenth century saw Antisemitism grafted onto Protestantism. The founder of that movement, Martin Luther, wrote in 1543, "we cannot tolerate [the Jews] if we do not wish to share in their lies, curses, and blasphemy." Not all early Protestants were as hostile to the Jews as was Luther. The Calvinists (denominations inspired by John Calvin, d. 1564) were often more tolerant, and it was an English Calvinist, Oliver Cromwell, who invited the Jews to return to England (1655). Luther's impact, however, was not just as a religious leader, but as a nationalist, and among his German followers he reinforced the conviction that Jews were a danger to Germany.

By the close of the Middle Ages, most Jews had either fled, or had been expelled from, western Europe. Some sought refuge in the Muslim world, but most instead traveled to central Europe, especially Poland, where the government offered them toleration. While the government might be tolerant, however - and even this was to change - the populace seems always to have been hostile. Indeed, all future massacres of European Jews, including the Holocaust, were to be concentrated in central Europe.

The first major assault on the Jews of this region came in 1648, when armies of Ukrainians and Cossacks, led by Bogdan Chmielnicki, massacred Jews throughout the Ukraine and on into Poland and Lithuania. As violence spread, local mobs joined in the carnage. The Chmielnicki massacres, which continued until 1657, cost the lives of at least 100,000 Jews, possibly several times that figure, making them more devastating than any such campaign prior to the twentieth century. But even beyond numbers, accounts testify to the brutality of the murderers. They tell of men being flayed, of women being cut open and having live cats sewn into them, of infants being spitted and roasted alive. A contemporary described one massacre as follows: "The [rabbi] was the first to offer himself as a martyr. Young and old saw the tortures, sufferings and wounds of the teacher who did not cease exhorting them to accept martyrdom in the name of God. The victims were killed with spears in order that they would die more slowly. Husbands, wives and children fell in heaps. They were not buried and dogs and swine fed on the bodies." The boundless hatred reflected in these reports, the desire of the killers to cause not merely death but agonizing death, these attitudes

would be mirrored in the Holocaust.

Even after the massacres ceased, virulent Jew-hatred continued to thrive in this region. Among the common people it retained a medieval flavor, drawing heavily on myths that had by now been discounted in the west. The churches, too, continued to play a large part in promoting Antisemitism. But perhaps what set the region off most dramatically from the rest of Europe was that the state was so active in persecuting the Jews.

The Russian government was consistently hostile. In the late fifteenth century, Jews were barred from residing in Russia. Moreover, as the empire expanded and swallowed up areas where Jews lived, it dealt with them harshly. During the eighteenth century Russia came to control a tract of land in central Europe that was home to many thousands of Jews. Rather than allow them to enter Russia, in 1772 Catherine the Great restricted them to the newly acquired areas, the "Pale of Settlement." Russian expansion continued, and eventually the Pale came to encompass a region that extended from the Baltic to the Black Sea and included Poland, Lithuania, and the Ukraine. Most Jews remained fixed in the Pale until it was abolished in 1917, after the Russian Revolution.

Within the Pale, a typical Jew lived in a shtetl (a predominantly Jewish village). Jewish culture and communal life flourished in these surroundings, so much so that the world of the shtetl - a world finally destroyed in the Holocaust - is even today recalled nostalgically by many Jews. It was, however, in some ways a harsh world, marked by incessant persecution emanating from the government of the tsar.

Legally barred from agriculture, most professions, and many forms of business, Jews were kept in poverty. Beyond that, however, they were kept in fear, for the government was quite open in its determination to solve the Jewish Problem, one way or another.

For the relatively small Jewish communities of Germany and western Europe, the situation was somewhat better. From the sixteenth through the early twentieth centuries, Jews in this region were seldom subjected to mob violence. And although governments were usually hostile to some degree, the level of persecution that was the norm in the Pale was rare here. Still, Antisemitism continued strong, even in periods that were characterized by new ideas and the abandonment of old ones.

From about 1700 on, it became less fashionable for educated Europeans to justify Jew-hatred solely on religious grounds. Instead, nationalism provided the primary justification. To Europeans generally, the Jews appeared to constitute a separate nation. Some believed, furthermore, that Jews like other nations partook of an essential nature that was uniquely theirs. Even if they converted to Christianity, they could not change that nature. The Germans were a nation, the French were a nation, the English were a nation - the Jews were a nation.

During the latter half of the nineteenth century, the rather fuzzy concept of differentness was put forward in a much more rigorous way. The new dividing line that would set Jews apart was race.

Although there were many contributors, racialism sprung particularly from Essay on the

Inequality of Human Races, a two-volume work written by a French aristocrat, Count Joseph Arthur de Gobineau, and published 1853-55. Gobineau argued that history was shaped by the conflict and interaction of the human races. Among the components of the white race, he argued, none was more important than the Indo-European, or "Aryan," the creator of all European civilizations. Another racial sub-group was the Semites, which included the Jews.

"Race," as the term was used by Gobineau and his successors, was in part defined by physical attributes like skin color. But a person's intelligence, behavior, and mentality - inner being, perspectives, values - were likewise thought to be racially determined, making each race very different from the others. It was also widely believed that all races were mutually hostile.

Soon other writers were embroidering Gobineau's basic concept with a web of theory and "scientific" observation that seemed scholarly. In part because of this, racialism came to have a special appeal to those who fancied themselves intellectual. Soon, too, racialists began to cast the Semites - which, in the context of Europe, meant the Jews - as a wholly despicable race and as the main threat to the Aryans, hence, to civilization. German racialists, and some of other nationalities, further argued that while most European nations had already been debased by "semitization" - interbreeding with the Jews - Germans had largely retained their racial purity. For this reason, the argument went, Jews had a particular hatred for Germany, and an obsession with destroying it, as they had destroyed other European civilizations.

Yet another product of nineteenth-century thought that was in some cases to prove damaging to Jews was Marxism. Not all Marxists were Antisemitic, and indeed some, including Karl Marx himself, were of Jewish descent, though few practiced Judaism. But many of them were hostile to the Jews, identifying them with capitalism.

Even as new arguments to justify Antisemitism were gaining popularity, Jews were becoming more prominent in European society. For several centuries prior to 1800, most Jews in western and central Europe had lived in - in many cases, had been legally restricted to - walled quarters, often called "ghettos." Beginning in about 1750, however, young Jews began to leave the ghettos, seeking advancement in business and the professions. Within a century, Jews were making an impact not only as professionals and businessmen but as artists and politicians. Furthermore, by the middle of the nineteenth century, Jews had won full citizenship in most nations of central and western Europe. At least on paper, they enjoyed the same rights as did their non-Jewish countrymen. As these developments demonstrate, not everyone hated the Jews or wanted to hold them back. Nevertheless, many Europeans feared the new direction, believing that Jews were poised to take over European politics and culture. For centuries, Jews had been hated for standing apart from broader European society. Now, they were hated for taking an active role in it.

Yet another dramatic reflection of the depth of Jew-hatred came in Russia (as well as Poland and the Ukraine), where political crises led the government to exploit popular Antisemitism by encouraging mob attacks on the Jews, the "pogroms." Nor did the fall of the

tsarist government quickly bring violence to an end. During the years 1918-20 many thousands of Jews were massacred, mostly by Ukrainian nationalists and by Russians who opposed the newly installed Bolshevik regime (which they believed to be under the control of the Jews).

Clearly, the Holocaust did not spring from nowhere. The hatred of Jews was age-old, and it had often caused violence in the past. During the Nazi period, and particularly in Germany and in the former Pale of Settlement, there were literally tens of millions who were eager to see the Jews victimized by violence. When the Holocaust came, many of these people would take part in the killing. Others would turn the Jews in for slaughter. Great numbers of Europeans would simply turn a deaf ear to the Jews who so desperately needed refuge. And a few, but only a few, would risk their own lives to help their Jewish neighbors.

The Antisemitism that descended to the twentieth century was multi-faceted. Religiously based Jew-hatred was still widespread, especially in some regions of Europe, and it was not uncommon to hear the hatred being justified on the grounds that Jews were anti-Christian or were Christ-killers. But the nature of justification had broadened during the nineteenth century, and it allowed for many perspectives. To nationalists, Jews were strangers, their own nation, "the enemy within." To racialists, they were innately hostile and were corrupters of the superior Aryan race. To Marxists and laborers, they were capitalist exploiters. The poor saw them as rich and envied their wealth. The weak saw them as powerful and resented their influence. Arguments put forward to justify Antisemitism were many, but the bottom line was always the same: hatred of the Jews.

Hitler and the Holocaust

Although Adolf Hitler was to become the embodiment of virulent Jew-hatred and of the Holocaust that it occasioned, his Antisemitism was in no way original. Hitler, who was born in April 1889 in the Austrian village of Braunau, was probably exposed to Antisemitism at an early age, and according to a boyhood friend, even as an adolescent he was given to making negative comments about the Jews. Hitler himself, however, later claimed that he had undergone a sudden conversion to Antisemitism and that it had come in 1909, when, on the streets of Vienna, he encountered "an apparition in a long caftan with black locks. Is this a Jew? was my first thought... But the longer I stared at this alien face ... the more my first question was transformed into a new conception. Is this a German?" So it was that Hitler, seeing one Jew in traditional costume, had a revelation: A Jew could not be a German.

By the close of World War One, Hitler's Jew-hatred was intense. He had accepted a complex of accusations and stereotypes that showed the Jews to be not only a potential but a present danger, already with much German blood on their hands and on the verge of triumph over the culture and people of Germany. The defeat of Germany in the war had not come on the battlefield, he believed, but rather because the "November Criminals" - Jews and their accomplices - had stabbed the nation in the back by forcing out the kaiser and agreeing to the armistice that had brought the war to a close in November 1918. In 1921 he wrote, "The army command made one mistake: that it did not string up in good time all the filthy Jewish rabble that drove our people into the dreadful calamity of 1918."

Hitler was obsessed by the Jewish Problem. In a speech of February 1925, he stated, "The greatest danger is and remains the alien poison in our body. All other dangers are transitory." Again and again, he evoked the image of the Jew as parasite, as leech, as destroyer: "The Jew has never founded any civilization," he said in 1922, "though he has destroyed hundreds." For centuries the Jew had prospered by sucking the blood of the masses, but even this was not enough: "In keeping with the ultimate aims of the Jewish struggle, which are not exhausted in the mere economic conquest of the world, but also demand its political subjugation ... he stops at nothing, and in his vileness he becomes so gigantic that no one need be surprised if among our people the personification of the devil as the symbol of all evil assumes the living shape of the Jew."

Hitler imagined the Jews to be nearing their goal of world domination. He blamed World War One on international Jewish finance, publicly stating this on a number of occasions. In January 1939, during a speech to the Reichstag, he addressed the possibility of another war. Again, he pointed to Jews as the instigators, and warned of the price they would pay: "If international finance Jewry in and outside Europe succeeds in plunging the peoples into another world war, then the end result will not be the Bolshevization of the earth and the consequent victory of Jewry but the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe."

A reference to annihilation was nothing new for Hitler. As early as 1922, he had told a crowd, "If I am ever really in power, the annihilation of the Jews will be my first and foremost task." Some historians believe that

Hitler was fantasizing when he made such statements and that at this early date he was not actually conceiving of the destruction of European, even German, Jewry. Nevertheless, three points can be made with assurance, and all bear on the Holocaust: Hitler's hatred and fear of the Jews was central to his world-view; as his drive into war suggests, he was quite willing to use violence on a massive scale; he considered life, especially non-Aryan life, very cheap. Albert Speer, who entered Hitler's inner circle in 1934, wrote in 1969, "For him who cared to hear, Hitler had never concealed even his intention to exterminate the Jewish people."

In his rise to power, Hitler used Antisemitism as a political weapon, blaming the Jews for Germany's defeat in the First World War, portraying them as capitalist exploiters of the German people, linking them to the Bolshevik threat - in general, encouraging everyone in his audience to place personal or national failures and fears at the door of the Jews. That his characterizations of the Jews were often contradictory - for example, that they were both capitalists and communists - made little difference. Audiences believed him. Centuries of Antisemitism had predisposed them to believe.

Hitler became chancellor of Germany in January 1933, and by the close of March his authority was almost absolute. Even as he was consolidating power, he began to move against the Jews. April 1933 brought a series of new pronouncements and policies that were intended to reduce Jewish involvement with the broader community. The government declared an official boycott of Jewish shops, doctors, and lawyers. It ordered the dismissal of all Jewish schoolteachers and of any civil servant who had

even one Jewish grandparent. Admission of Jews to public schools and to universities was sharply curtailed. Hitler offered to respect the independence of the judiciary, provided that "necessary measures" were taken, including the dismissal of all Jewish staff. The judges agreed.

In stages, the Jews were stripped of the legal protection enjoyed by other Germans. April 1933 saw the enactment of no fewer than eleven laws that impacted specifically on Jews. This hectic pace reflected how seriously the Nazis took their Antisemitic campaign, and there was no letup. In all, nearly 200 pieces of Anti-Jewish legislation were generated between 1933 and 1939. Perhaps most significant were the Nuremberg Laws of 1935, which: defined the term "Jew" (anyone with three Jewish grandparents, or two if he associated with the Jewish community); barred Jews from marrying Aryans; and denied them the status of "citizen of the Reich." By other legislation, German Jews were barred from various occupations and were placed under a number of legal disabilities.

Abroad, this legislation was widely criticized, but aside from a few privately sponsored boycotts of German goods nothing was done. Indeed, while Germany went further in institutionalizing Antisemitism than did other nations, a number of European governments initiated anti-Jewish policies during the 1930's, and discrimination against Jews was accepted almost everywhere - if not by everyone - including the United States. Fully one-third of Americans responding to a poll in 1939 said that something should be done to limit the power of Jews in the business world. One-tenth of the re-spondents said that Jews should be deported.

The Nazis placed a high priority on insuring that the rising generation would be firm in its Jew-hatred. German textbooks provided an incessant assault on the Jews, insisting that, in dozens of ways, they had oppressed Germans and had attempted to engineer the destruction of Germany. Schoolteachers were expected to reinforce the message in the texts by regularly pointing out to their classes how dominant and how dangerous to Germany Jews were - or at least had been, before Hitler had stepped forward to protect the German people. Conversely, if they had any Jewish pupils, they were to heap ridicule on them. Outside the schools, Hitler Youth, an organization that Aryan teenagers were required to join, promoted virulent Antisemitism among its members. The press likewise vilified the Jews, both by the printed word and in cartoons. So did films and countless speeches. The ring of propaganda was extensive, and its message was incessant.

From the first, the Nazi government condoned acts of violence against German Jews, and soon it turned to direct sponsorship. In early November 1938, a Jewish teenager, infuriated when the Germans deported his parents to their native Poland, murdered a German official in Paris. This was the occasion for the Nazis to launch an intense verbal assault on the German Jewish community and to encourage mob violence against the Jews, promising that the police would not interfere with "the spontaneous reaction of the German people." On November 9-10, "Crystal Night," mobs throughout Germany looted Jewish homes and businesses, destroying 7000 Jewish-owned shops and many synagogues. Thousands of Jews were beaten and 91 were murdered, but as promised the perpetrators

went unpunished. Indeed, the Jewish community was heavily fined for the damage that it had "caused" on this occasion, and shortly thereafter, 30,000 Jews were sent to concentration camps - among the first in a long line that would face imprisonment and ultimately death.

While the Nazis had been mounting their increasingly virulent campaign of Antisemitism, they had also been organizing the corps that would engineer the Holocaust. By 1939 Heinrich Himmler - aside from Hitler, the most powerful man in Germany - was in charge of a network of units that even today are synonymous with terror: the SS (Schutzstaffeln, "Protection Squads"), a paramilitary police force that was the core of the network; the Gestapo, or secret police; and the Waffen SS, a conglomerate of armed units that oppressed and often killed, including the Order Police and the Death's Head Division. Himmler's right-hand man was Reinhard Heydrich, probably the chief architect of the Holocaust in its early phase (he was assassinated by Czech freedom fighters in 1942). Heydrich not only helped Himmler rule his empire, but had particular charge of mobile units known as Einsatzgruppen, which were to play a central role in the Holocaust.

The first months of war in 1939 saw the Germans sweep through Poland. This success, combined with the earlier annexation of Austria and much of Czechoslovakia, brought almost four million Jews under German control. Some Jews were killed and others deported, but the main aim of German policy at this time, especially in Poland, was to force them into ghettos, where they could be isolated and so

more easily be managed. The policy of ghettoization continued through 1940, a year marked by Germany's conquest of the Netherlands, Belgium, and France, victories that imperiled many thousands of Jews.

By mid-1941, the elements necessary to engineer the "Final Solution" - the destruction of European Jewry - were largely in place. Not only in Germany but throughout Nazi-occupied or allied Europe, the Jews had been stripped of most legal protection. In many cases, as in the ghettos, they were physically cut off from the broader community, and even in regions where they were not, they were in general easily distinguished, for the Germans and most collaborationist or allied governments required Jews to wear a yellow Star of David (the "badge of shame"). The Jews were totally exposed, with few friends and few defenses.

On July 31, 1941, Hermann Goering, Hitler's confidant and favorite, issued an order charging Heydrich to make "all necessary preparations in regard to organizational and financial matters for bringing about a complete solution of the Jewish question in the German sphere of influence in Europe. Wherever other governmental agencies are involved, these are to cooperate with you." With this order, the Final Solution became a fixed element in state policy. But mass killing had already begun. Just before German forces moved into the U.S.S.R., Einsatzgruppen commanders were informed, "The Führer has ordered the liquidation of all Jews, Gypsies, and Communist functionaries in the entire area of the Soviet Union in order to secure the territory." The massacre of Jews commenced almost at the moment the invasion was launched, on June 22.

Goering's order placed the entire machinery of the state at Heydrich's disposal. During the months that followed, it was particularly Heydrich who planned strategy for obliterating the Jews of Europe. While the Nazis had established concentration camps as early as 1933, Dachau being the first, Hitler's order prompted the construction of several camps that served no function other than to effect the killing of as many human beings as possible, as quickly as possible. At all of these camps, the preponderant majority of those killed were Jews. The first of the death camps, Chelmno, commenced operations in December 1941. By July 1942, Treblinka, Belzec, and Sobibór were functioning. Maidanek, established as a prisoner of war camp in July 1941, became a killing center two years later. The largest facility of all, Auschwitz, had been opened as a concentration camp in 1940. In late 1941 a second facility, Birkenau, was established there, and early in 1942 it began to function as a death camp. All six camps were in Poland (including a portion in the west that had been annexed by Germany), the center of European Jewry.

Once the Final Solution had been undertaken, it was pursued with single-mindedness. Trains that were transporting Jews to the death camps were given priority over even those that were carrying German troops or munitions. Nor were there exceptions to the rule of death for Jews. During the war, Germany faced a desperate labor shortage, and high government officials like Speer pleaded that Jews who could do essential jobs be allowed to live so long as they were needed. Such requests were, however, quashed by the SS, which had the ear of Hitler. Some Jews were allowed to live and labor for a time in ghettos or

in camps like Auschwitz, but the reprieve was intended to be only temporary. Every Jew in Nazi-controlled Europe lay under a death sentence.

Within the death camps, Nazi officials and technocrats cooperated in streamlining the process of liquidation. The Nazis took great pride in these death camps, both in their efficiency and their purpose. One visitor to Belzec, a professor of hygiene, watched the gas chamber in action, then told camp officials, "When one sees the bodies of the Jews, one understands the greatness of your work!" One of those who took pride in efficiency of the killing process was Rudolf Hoess, commandant at Auschwitz for most of the war. Hoess later recalled that at Treblinka the victims were killed with carbon monoxide, a process that he considered "not ... very efficient": "So at Auschwitz, I used Cyclon B, which was a crystallized prussic acid dropped into the death chamber. It took from three to fifteen minutes to kill the people in the chamber, according to climatic conditions. We knew when the people were dead because they stopped screaming." The gas chambers at Auschwitz could, by his estimate, accommodate 2000 human beings - ten times more, he noted, than could those at Treblinka.

To the death camps came trainloads of Jews from throughout Nazi-controlled Europe. Jews were expected to pay for their passage, in cash or with anything they possessed that might have value. To the extent possible, the Final Solution was intended to be self supporting. Even years later, at Auschwitz and other camps, the huge piles of clothing, glasses, and shoes taken from Jews on their arrival continue to bear witness to the effort to make the victims pay for the very process that took their lives.

Once the Jews arrived, camp officials concentrated on "processing" them quickly. Husbands and wives, parents and children, would be forcibly separated. They would then be required to undress, and women would have their hair shorn - clothing and hair were of use to the regime. Last would come the gas chambers. Within a few hours of their arrival, the Jews would be dead. After the bodies were checked for gold teeth, they were disposed of, and most often incinerated, either in specially designed ovens or in open pits.

At some camps, virtually all of the arrivals were marked for immediate death. At others, like Auschwitz, there were selections, and some Jews (always a minority of them) who were judged to be fit enough to work were allowed to live temporarily. To be a young child meant certain death; as Hoess put it, "Children of tender years were invariably exterminated since by reason of their youth they were unable to work." Their parents, especially their mothers, might be sent with them to the gas chambers. Even Jews who passed the initial review would usually fall into physical decline because of overwork, meager rations, or illness, and they would be sent to the gas chambers at a later selection, for the process was ongoing.

By the time that the collapse of Nazi Germany brought the Holocaust to a close, approximately three million Jews had been murdered in the camps, especially the six that were mainly designed for extermination, Auschwitz itself accounting for about 1.1 million deaths. The other main organ of the Holocaust was the killing squads, particularly Heydrich's Einsatzgruppen. These units killed about 1.5 million Jews. They were most active in 1941-42, especially in Russia and the Ukraine.

In one instance, September 29-30, 1941, a detachment of Einsatzgruppe C shot 33,771 men, women, and children, almost all of them Jews, by the ravine of Babi Yar, near Kiev. Matters were so arranged that as each victim was shot, he or she fell into the ravine, thereby completing the disposal process. That such an exact account of the killings at Babi Yar can be given, including even a precise total of those shot, is due to the fact that the commander of the unit responsible proudly reported the affair to Berlin. He added, "The population scarcely knew that the Jews were liquidated, but the latest experience suggests that they would not have objected."

Besides the vast numbers who were murdered in the camps or by the killing squads, an additional 1.5 million Jews perished in the Holocaust. Many of these victims died in the ghettos, some of starvation or disease, others in massacres carried out by the Nazis or their accomplices. In the camps, some Jews were worked to death by their Nazi overlords. Some were killed on the whim of a guard or officer. And many died of starvation or of epidemics in the crowded, pest-ridden camps. This was especially common late in the war. Among those who did not live to be liberated was Anne Frank, the Dutch girl whose diary, composed during two years in hiding, was to become perhaps the most famous document of the Holocaust. In March 1945 Anne died of typhus at Bergen-Belsen.

Many of the Jews who were swept away in the Holocaust were killed by non-German paramilitary forces, mobs, and individuals. In Rumania, the pro-Nazi Iron Guard massacred thousands. Polish mobs were responsible for killing many Jews. "Hiwis," predominantly

Ukrainian auxiliaries that operated under the control of the Germans, participated in massacres and were often given the assignment of scouring the ghettos that were being cleared, making certain that no Jews escaped. Croatia, a state created by Germany and heavily influenced by it, was the scene of incessant persecution and murder. As the war proceeded, the Nazis recruited ever more non-Germans into the forces that effected the Final Solution. By 1945, 20 of the 38 divisions of the Waffen SS were mainly non-German in composition.

In regions where Antisemitism was especially widespread and virulent, the Germans often let local mobs or militia attend to the Jews. During the summer of 1941 the officer commanding an Einsatzgruppe unit in Lithuania reported that at Kovno, on June 25-26, "the Lithuanian partisans exterminated fifteen hundred Jews.... On the following nights, twenty-three hundred Jews were liquidated in similar fashion." Throughout Nazi-occupied Europe the Germans offered rewards for turning in or betraying Jews who were in hiding, and sometimes they paid for their murder, as well. According to an eyewitness, at Korets, in the Ukraine, "announcements were posted in the streets stating that any person who brought the head of a Jew to the Kommandant would receive 2.2 pounds of salt. The Ukrainian murderers fanned out through the forests to hunt Jews. They murdered them, cut off their heads, and brought them to the Kommandant."

In western Europe, too, the Nazis received much assistance in carrying through their campaign of mass murder. Probably no government outside of central Europe proved itself more eager to help than did the fascist regime in Vichy France. The premier, Pierre

Laval, cooperated in the deportation of thousands of foreign Jews who had sought refuge in France. He then insisted that the Germans arrange to take the children who had been left behind - this, despite the fact that they had not asked and were not ready. An eyewitness had this account of the day that the children boarded the trains bound for Auschwitz: "I noticed one gendarme take the bundle of a boy of four or five to help him walk. But he was immediately reprimanded by an adjutant, who told him rudely that a French soldier did not carry the bags of a Jew... Once we were in the station, the children were loaded onto the trains in a sudden burst of speed.... It was at this point that the children felt frightened. They didn't want to go and started to cry."

As this report suggests, even while the Nazis could count on Laval's cooperation, so could he count on French police and soldiers - and, indeed, on many French civilian - to carry through a policy that resulted in the death of tens of thousands of French Jews and Jewish refugees. In May 1944 Anne Frank wrote in her diary, "I don't believe that the big men, the politicians and the capitalists alone, are guilty of the war. Oh no, the little man is just as guilty." The same may be said of the Holocaust. Big men like Hitler and Laval could lay out policy regarding the Jews. But it was the "little man" who carried that policy through, and he was to be found almost throughout Europe.

By the time of Germany's surrender in May 1945 - less than a month after Hitler committed suicide - about two-thirds of the nine million Jews who had lived in Europe in 1939 had perished. The greatest carnage had taken place in Poland, where of about 3.3

million Jews living in 1939, only 20,000 remained (1,000 of these survivors were murdered by Polish mobs in a series of pogroms in 1945-46). Some had managed to escape during the war, and others had left when the camps were liberated, rather than again settle in Poland, but about 90% of the 3.3 million perished in the Holocaust. In the Ukraine, 900,000 (60% of the 1939 population) were dead; 228,000 (90%) in the Baltic states; 350,000 in Russia (25%); 600,000 in Hungary and Czechoslovakia (75%); 300,000 in Rumania (50%); 210,000 in Germany and Austria (90%). These, the nations of central and eastern Europe, accounted for most of the dead, though high percentages of Jews died in almost all regions that the Germans occupied or controlled.

Common Questions regarding the Holocaust

How much is actually known?

The Holocaust is one of the best documented episodes of the twentieth century. To begin with, we have the testimony of Jews who were caught up in it. Some of these witnesses, like Anne Frank, did not survive, but were nevertheless able to leave some record of their suffering. In addition, thousands of Jews who survived the camps have written or spoken publicly of their experiences. The Shoah Project, organized by Steven Spielberg, has interviewed 50,000 survivors, and their videotaped testimony is now available to researchers. Many non-Jews with direct knowledge of some aspect of the Holocaust have also borne witness.

Perhaps the most important sources, however - the most detailed, the most voluminous - were provided by the

perpetrators themselves. Although during the last months of the war the Germans destroyed many thousands of documents relative to the Holocaust, much material survived to be seized by the Allies. No category of sources is of greater importance than the records of the war crimes trials, and especially of the trials held at Nuremberg by the International Military Tribunal in 1945-46. Best known of the later trials is that of Adolf Eichmann, held in 1961 in Jerusalem. Eichmann, who headed the Gestapo's Department of Jewish Affairs 1941-45, helped to supervise the Final Solution, and may have had more knowledge of its implementation than had any other individual. In statements during interrogation and at the trial, Eichmann corroborated much of what was already known about the history of the killing campaign and provided additional details, as well.

Historians do not face a shortage of material on the Holocaust. Rather, their problem lies in making sense of a vast quantity of data. The trend in recent scholarship has therefore been to focus on particular aspects of the Holocaust, confining coverage to a manageable framework. However, the general history of the Final Solution has already been well covered by a generation of older scholars.

How much was known while the Holocaust was taking place?

By mid-1942, accounts of the mass assault on Jewry were being disseminated by western newspapers and by the BBC, which reached into Germany itself. On December 17, 1942, the U.S., Britain, and other allies issued a statement that "the German authorities ...

are now carrying into effect Hitler's oft-repeated intention to exterminate the Jewish people in Europe."

If reports of the Holocaust were spreading in the west by 1942, it is not surprising that in Germany and occupied Europe the news was also filtering through. The Nazis made no secret of the fact that they were persecuting Jews and were deporting them to concentration and labor camps. They did, on the other hand, try to cover up their campaign of murder, and they threatened harsh penalties for civilians or uniformed personnel who spread "rumors" about the treatment of the Jews. Nevertheless, the Holocaust soon became common knowledge in central Europe, where most of the killing took place. Word later spread throughout Germany and occupied Europe.

Among the Jews themselves, reports of the killing spread quickly but unevenly. Jews in Poland heard the stories early on. The news came later to Jewish communities elsewhere in occupied Europe, but those who had access to the Allied media soon heard of the danger. In areas that were isolated and poorly fed by news, however, the Jews remained unaware until it was too late. Even as the Germans were advancing into the U.S.S.R., many Jews in the Ukraine and Russia continued in the dark.

Although reports of the killing campaign became widespread, there were those who refused to believe them. Atrocity stories were common during wartime, and often they turned out to be fabricated. Also, the fact that the reported victims were Jews many indifferent to the news.

Why didn't the Jews flee, to escape the Nazis?

In fact, they did, in large numbers. By the outbreak of World War II, more than half of all Jews who had lived in Germany as of 1933 had departed. Jews outside Germany generally did not anticipate that they would fall under Nazi control, but once the onslaught began and the danger became apparent, many of them also attempted to leave.

The decision to go was seldom an easy one. It meant leaving behind siblings, parents, and grandparents. And Jews who chose to leave still faced daunting prospects. For most of those in central Europe, escape meant, first, fleeing the ghettos that they had been forced into. Guards ringed the ghettos, however, and often murdered Jews who were caught trying to flee. Those who escaped might be killed by non-Jewish countrymen or be-trayed to the Nazis. Elsewhere in Europe, too, fleeing Jews faced murder or betrayal.

To find refuge, most Jews had to be able to escape the Nazi-controlled area. Switzerland, Sweden, and Spain, all neutral nations, came to harbor thousands of Jews. Italy, despite being a German ally, served many Jews as a place of refuge. Some Jews who escaped to the east found a temporary haven in the Soviet Union - though Russian troops drove back many others - while perhaps 20,000 went on to Shanghai.

Many Jews who tried to escape found the doors closed. Western countries, including the United States, had established restrictive immigration policies that had in part been inspired by a desire to hold down the number of Jews coming in from central and eastern Europe. Even in a time of crisis, they were unwilling to increase the quotas for Jewish

refugees, or to cut red tape so that they might enter quickly.

One episode epitomized the difficulties of Jews who were attempting to emigrate. In May 1939 the *St. Louis* sailed from Hamburg with 937 Jewish passengers. The Jews had visas that guaranteed them entry into Cuba, and some were hoping to go on to the United States. But on arriving in Havana they were told that the Cuban government had decided not to honor the visas. They were not allowed to disembark there, nor did the Americans allow them entry. In early June the *St. Louis* returned to Europe.

During the 1930's and the Holocaust period itself, many European Jews sought to escape to Palestine (now Israel), which was then under a British mandate. In May 1939, however, the British, bowing to Arab pressure, agreed to sharply curtail Jewish immigration into Palestine. During the war, the British enforced this policy to the extent that, while some Jewish refugees from Europe were able to gain entry into Palestine, many others were turned back.

Why didn't the Jews fight back?

The image persists of Jews going meekly to their doom. Certainly, many did, even in the death camps. But there is much more to the story than that. Jews arrived at the camps after days, sometimes weeks, of travel in filthy, crowded cattle cars, with little food or water. Emerging at their destinations, weak and faint, they were hurried along by screaming guards. Their oppressors had the guns, the whips, and the dogs. Yet, even in such a hopeless situation, many Jews refused to die quietly. Hoess wrote, "at Auschwitz we endeavored to fool the

victims into thinking that they were to go through a delousing process. Of course, frequently they realized our true intentions and we sometimes had riots and difficulties due to that fact.”

Jews did indeed fight back. There were risings in several Polish ghettos in the spring of 1943, the best known being in Warsaw, where between April 19 and June poorly armed resistance fighters held out against a strong German force, inflicting heavy casualties. There were even risings in the death camps. The most famous and successful effort came at Sobibór, where, on October 14, 1943, a majority of the 600 Jews in the camp rose up, killing over two dozen SS and Ukrainian guards. About 300 escaped, and some of them went on to fight with Soviet partisans. In almost all of the camp revolts, however, as in the ghetto risings, the Jews were overpowered by superior arms, and many were killed. Most of them knew beforehand that this would be the outcome. Theirs was not so much a fight to live as to die with dignity. As one of the Warsaw fighters told his captain, “If I have to die, I shall die like a man and not like a sheep in a flock.”

Jews fought the Nazis in other ways, as well. Those living in countries at war with the Axis enlisted in the armed forces, often out of all proportion to their share of the population. Within Nazi-occupied Europe, Jews joined resistance movements. They played a noteworthy role in the resistance in Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, and it is estimated that 15-20% of French resistance fighters were Jewish. In Poland, where Antisemitism was so deep that would-be freedom fighters who were Jewish were often turned away by resistance groups, Jews organized their own units.

But perhaps one should also consider more broadly what it meant to “resist” the Nazis. Certainly there were Jews who broke under the strain of ghetto and camp life. Some were willing to do anything to stay alive, even if it meant appeasing their Nazi overlords by betraying the hiding places of fellow Jews. But many refused to break. In the ghettos, Jews resisted Nazi attempts to destroy their sense of identity and of community. They maintained libraries, orchestras, welfare agencies, and schools. At the camps, too, they found ways to defy their oppressors. The Nazis not only attacked the bodies of the Jews, but regularly tried to break their spirit. In one case, on Yom Kippur, a day of fasting for Jews, camp authorities offered Jewish prisoners delicious food and dessert, far different from the horrendous provisions that were the norm. The aim was obvious: to weaken the Jews’ spirit by inducing them to break their fast. But the Jews refused the food. This, too, was resistance.

Could anything have been done to help the Jews?

Since the war, it has been something of a commonplace for Europeans who merely stood by during the carnage to claim that nothing they could have done would have made a difference. In fact, however, many Jews were saved by non-Jewish neighbors who hid them or helped them flee. Others benefited through the intervention of church or state.

Those who provided help did so for various reasons. Some were motivated by greed and aided Jews who could pay handsomely. Likewise eager to take advantage were religious communities, mainly convents, that took in Jewish children and then sought to

convert them. But there were also the individuals and communities that offered help without expecting reward. These altruists, or “Righteous Gentiles,” were to be found throughout Europe, though more commonly in some regions than in others.

Some altruists shielded Jewish friends, but it appears that more often the people that they aided were slight acquaintances or total strangers. What prompted them to help? Sometimes it was a strong aversion to Nazism that caused them to look with favor on the group that suffered most from Nazi oppression. But generally they were moved less by hatred of the Nazis than by compassion for their victims coupled with a strong ethical, humanitarian code. They simply could not turn away from those who so desperately needed their help.

Shielding Jews was difficult and dangerous. This was notably so in Poland, the country that was treated most harshly by the German occupiers. There individuals and their families were sometimes executed for no other offense than having protected a Jew. Even whole communities might suffer. One village was burnt to the ground because the residents were accused of providing food and shelter to Jews who were hiding out in the nearby forest. Outside Poland, the penalties were typically less severe. Nevertheless, many who were found to be sheltering or aiding Jews were sent to concentration camps.

Some altruists concentrated on protecting an individual or a single family, while others took part in underground movements that ferried the Jews to places of refuge. A few, however, were in situations where they could provide help on a

massive scale. The most successful, Raoul Wallenberg, gave up the security of a comfortable life in Sweden to travel to Budapest in 1944. There he was took on the position of attaché to the Swedish Embassy, with a particular mission to rescue the Jews of Hungary. By issuing certificates of protection and by other contrivances, he was able to save perhaps 100,000 Jews from deportation to the death camps. His fate, however, underlines the risk that the altruists ran, and the fact that danger did not come from the Nazis alone. When Budapest was “liberated” by the Soviet Army, he was seized. It took more than three decades before western governments made a serious attempt to locate him, and it was not until 2000 that a former Soviet official confirmed that Wallenberg had been executed in 1947. Another of the altruists, Oskar Schindler, a Sudeten German industrialist, has become known to a broad public in recent years, being the subject of a novel and an acclaimed film. He succeeded in shielding over 1000 Jews in his factories and unlike Wallenberg he lived to be thanked for his efforts.

Aiding the Jews was often lonely work. In regions where Antisemitism was widespread and intense, altruists could expect little support, and the threat of exposure was very real. Occasionally, however, people joined together in an effort to save Jews. In Poland, a group called “Zegota” was instrumental in rescuing 4000 Jewish children. Many of the residents of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, a French village near the Alps, shielded Jewish refugees.

The most memorable case of community involvement came in Denmark. Realizing that military opposition was futile, Denmark in 1940 became a most unwilling ally of Germany.

But despite German pressure early in the war, Danish Jews were protected from persecution. The Germans occupied Denmark in August 1943, and an order was given to seize the Jews for deportation. This roundup was planned for October 1, but during the last night of September the vast majority of Danish Jews, approximately 7200, were ferried to Sweden. Many Danes knew about the evacuation, and a high percentage participated.

Outside Nazi-occupied Europe, efforts on behalf of the Jews were haphazard and ineffectual. Among countries at war with Germany, the highest priority was of course military victory, not saving the Jews. But the Allied efforts in combating the Holocaust were so feeble as to suggest that a focus on the war effort was not the only issue. In January 1944 Henry Morgenthau, the American Secretary of the Treasury, sent President Roosevelt a memorandum: "on the Acquiescence of This Government in the Murder of Jews." Morgenthau wrote: "Certain officials in our State Department ... have been guilty ... of wilful attempts to prevent action from being taken to rescue Jews from Hitler." The State Department does indeed seem to have been an impediment, and so were equivalent bureaus in other Allied governments. It would be unfair to say that officials in these bureaus approved of the Final Solution. But many of them, whether because of sheer Antisemitism or just a desire to maintain the status quo at home, were fearful that if the Allied nations liberated the Jews they would be flooded with refugees.

It was not only government officials who stood by idly during the Holocaust. The highest leadership of most European churches, Protestant and Catholic alike,

failed to act, even to the extent of condemning what was happening to the Jews. Furthermore, some church leaders who tried to temper the drive against the Jews appealed mainly on behalf of the ones who had accepted baptism, and there were those who saw in the killing campaign an opportunity to coerce Jews into accepting Christianity. The idea of standing up for practicing, faithful Jews was alien to them.

Nevertheless, many individual clergymen, including some in high positions, did have the altruistic spirit. Few altruists can be credited with saving more lives than did Angelo Roncalli, the papal nuncio in Istanbul. During the war, he helped perhaps 25,000 Jews in southeastern Europe to escape and also encouraged the Bulgarian leaders to stand up to Germany on the matter of deportations. Later, as Pope John XXIII, he was to lead the Catholic movement of reconciliation with the Jews.

In all, it appears that 500,000 Jews, perhaps one million, were saved by individuals, groups, or communities. Many more could have been saved had it not been for the indifference or hostility of the populace at large. The Holocaust period saw the majority of Europeans stand aside, neither promoting the killing campaign nor doing anything to inhibit it. Undoubtedly, some bystanders wanted to help the Jews, but were fearful of consequences or were uncertain of what they could do to make a difference. Undoubtedly, too, there were bystanders who did not realize what fate really awaited the Jews who were being loaded into cattle-cars; they may have heard the rumors, but discounted them. A high proportion of Europeans, however, wanted the Jews out of their midst, and they cared little how this was accomplished. Bystanders they

may have been, but they were by no means “innocent” bystanders.

How “normal” were the perpetrators?

One common image of the perpetrator is that of a psychotic, who enjoyed inflicting pain and even death on helpless victims. Certainly, there were those who seem to have found pleasure in their work. In some cases, they may simply have been satisfying a sadistic urge, and the identity of their victims may have meant little. It appears, however, that even sadism was generally magnified by strong Antisemitism.

Some of the perpetrators were products of special indoctrination by the Nazis, often through Hitler Youth or the SS. Moreover, they were led to believe that their duty was necessary to save the fatherland. But many of those who handled the killing at the death camps were non-Germans, often Ukrainians and Lithuanians. Moreover, they were notorious for their brutality. Yet, they were not indoctrinated by the Nazis. Their hatred of Jews represented the legacy of bigotry that was medieval in origin and reflected religious and national animosity.

Very different in circumstances and behavior, but still necessary to effect the Holocaust, was the group of people sometimes called “desk murderers.” This category included bureaucrats, clerks, and others who helped to engineer the Final Solution without participating directly in the killing. Heading the group were officials of the governmental agencies that shared aspects of management of the complex process of ghettoization, transportation, and liquidation. There were

constant turf wars among these men, as they attempted to increase the power and prestige of their respective agencies, and often the “turf” involved was their share of control over the eradication of the Jews. Besides the directors, every branch of government included many bureaucrats and clerks, who assisted in the killing without themselves pulling a trigger.

To many, Eichmann has seemed the quintessential desk murderer. When on trial in Jerusalem, he maintained, “I never killed a Jew [and] I never gave an order to kill,” although he admitted “aiding and abetting ... one of the greatest crimes in the history of Humanity.” Hannah Arendt, in her famous report on the trial, commented, “It would have been very comforting indeed to believe that Eichmann was a monster.... The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were ... terribly and terrifyingly normal.”

Akin to the desk murderers were the corporate leaders who exploited the Final Solution to increase their profits, using Jews as slave laborers or providing gas for their liquidation. Many professionals, especially engineers and scientists, likewise played a large part in designing and supplying the apparatus of death. By no means were all perpetrators ignorant thugs.

Among the professionals who involved themselves in the Holocaust, few were more notorious as a group than were the Nazi doctors. The best known of them, Josef Mengele, regularly presided over the selection process at Auschwitz, deciding by a flick of the wrist which Jews might live awhile longer and

which would be gassed immediately. He also conducted experiments on Jewish (and non-Jewish) prisoners. Often he used sets of identical twins, and when he felt the need he had no compunction about ordering that a child be killed so that he could dissect the body. But Mengele was not alone. Many doctors experimented. Like other perpetrators, these men found arguments to justify their activity. When one was asked how, being bound by medical ethics, he could participate in a program of torment and murder, he answered, "Of course I am a doctor and I want to preserve life. And out of respect for human life, I would remove a gangrenous appendix from a diseased body. The Jew is the gangrenous appendix in the body of mankind."

Those involved in the killing process could also salve their consciences - assuming salve was necessary - with the notion that they were doing their duty as good soldiers. At Nuremberg and for years afterwards, men on trial for their role in the Holocaust argued that they had "only followed orders." During the war, in fact, Nazi officials directing the Final Solution constantly emphasized the importance of following orders, even when to do so was painful. Not surprisingly, the SS leadership was especially blunt on this issue. In October 1943, Himmler told an assembly of SS officers, "It's one of those things it is easy to talk about. 'The Jewish race is being exterminated,' says one Party member, 'that's quite clear....' Most of you must know what it means when 100 corpses are lying side by side, or 500 or 1,000. To have stuck it out and at the same time ... to have remained decent fellows, that is what has made us hard."

Even men who engineered the Holocaust later claimed that they had been

compelled to act by a sense of duty. In the memoir that he wrote in the months before his execution in 1947, Rudolf Hoess, the former commandant at Auschwitz, insisted that because he was in command he had been forced to be hard and to follow orders without question: "I had to watch coldly, while the mothers with laughing or crying children went into the gas chambers.... I had to watch hour after hour, by day and by night, the removal and burning of the bodies, the extraction of the teeth, the cutting of the hair, the whole grisly, interminable business.... I had to look through the peephole of the gas chambers and watch the process of death itself, because the doctors wanted me to see it."

Despite the "only following orders" defense, however, it appears that generally it took little persuasion to cause men to kill the Jews. Testimony given in Hamburg during the 1960's underscores this point. At issue was the fate of several former SS officers, who were accused of having committed war crimes in German-occupied Poland in 1942-43, while heading an Order Police battalion (a German unit that was intended to maintain control over occupied territory). About 220 veterans of the battalion made statements prior to the trial. In particular, they spoke of the first time that they were called upon to kill: a day in July 1942 when, one by one, they shot about 1500 Jews, most of them women and children.

A number of the witnesses recalled that after their commander had told the men of the orders to liquidate he had promised that any of the older men in the battalion who was unwilling to participate would receive alternative duty. Despite this offer, only one officer and about twelve men had asked

to be excused. Explaining the fact that so few had withdrawn, some witnesses stated that members of the battalion had hoped for advancement within the corps and had felt that they would be jeopardizing their careers by backing out. Others had been fearful of being considered cowards or unmanly if they refused to join in the shooting.

Most members of the battalion seem to have been reasonably stable family men. They were neither sadists nor psychopaths. They were for the most part 35-45, hence too old to have been in Hitler Youth or to have received indoctrination in school. Being the product of an earlier generation did not, however, mean that they did not share with the Nazis a hatred of the Jews, and probably all of them were Antisemitic to some extent.

It may be reassuring to believe that those who killed the Jews were automatons who had been brainwashed into blind obedience, or that they were psychotics. Either characterization leaves un-touched a generally positive sense of human nature. The evidence, however, does not support these depictions. Time and again the sources tell of camp guards and SS men tormenting Jewish prisoners to no other end but to derive pleasure. Randomly they murdered Jews; randomly, too, they pointed pistols at them, then purposely shot a little wide and laughed as they saw terror in the victim's face. Only following orders? By no means. Psychotic? In some cases, probably so. But psychosis, however defined, is an abnormality, and it does not appear that by and large the perpetrators were abnormal.

While there were many categories of perpetrator, a study of them leads to one

general conclusion: Most of the people who were responsible for the Holocaust quite willingly accepted their various roles. Some were eager to take part, while others, who may have been reluctant at first, soon rationalized their part in killing the Jews.

Was the Holocaust unique?

The issue of whether the Holocaust was unique can be examined in two ways: as opposed to other episodes of mass murder in Jewish history; as opposed to large-scale killing campaigns that have targeted other groups. We have seen that the mass murder of Jews was not unique to the Holocaust, for there had been many such episodes in preceding centuries. Still, the death toll and the breadth of the region involved during the Nazi killing campaign had never been matched. If the Holocaust is truly unique in Jewish history, however, it is at least as much because of the unprecedented extent of state involvement. In previous centuries, European governments had vilified the Jews, persecuted them, banished them, and sometimes murdered them. But usually, killing campaigns undertaken by the state had been small-scale, and governments had usually stood against wholesale slaughter. Episodes of mass murder, such as the Chmielnicki massacres, had been mob actions (though often some socially prominent figures, like crusaders, had provided leadership), and usually they had taken place when central authority was weak. Even as regards the pogroms, the tsarist government approved of and encouraged the violence, but did not directly manage it. In the case of the Holocaust, the situation was very different, for this killing campaign was organized and massively supported by the state.

As for the question of how unique the Holocaust is in relation to killing campaigns directed against groups other than the Jews, we need not look beyond the twentieth century, for it saw more episodes of mass murder than did any other. The Nazis and their allies were responsible for killing several hundred thousand Gypsies. Murder campaigns were common in lands that Germany invaded or occupied, and millions of civilians died in consequence, especially in Poland and the Soviet Union. In addition, many groups were persecuted by the Nazis, including Jehovah's Witnesses and homosexuals. Germans deemed by the state to be leading "lives unworthy of life," such as the retarded, mentally disturbed, or epileptic, were done away with.

What distinguished the Holocaust was the totality of the Nazis' aim. In no other case did those who planned and managed the killing campaign seek total destruction. It was the intention of Hitler and the other architects of the Final Solution to entirely wipe out the Jews of Europe, and perhaps beyond. Furthermore, their plan was pursued far more single-mindedly than was the effort targeting any other group. The Nazis committed many men and vast resources to the effort to eradicate the Jews, and they continued the campaign even when their armies were in retreat. Nazi officials like Eichmann regarded the killing of the Jews to be their main function, pursuing it avidly almost to the day when Germany surrendered.

Even leaving the Nazis aside, the list of mass murder campaigns is so lengthy that only the largest_scale episodes can be noted here. In 1915, the Turkish government spearheaded a campaign that resulted in the death of perhaps

one million Armenians. Several episodes of mass killing occurred in the Soviet Union during the Stalinist period. Beginning in 1928, Stalin demanded that peasants surrender their land for collectivization. Large numbers refused, and about ten million were either killed outright or were sent to Siberia, where many starved or froze to death. In the years 1936-39, Stalin's "Great Purge" cost another two million lives. Finally, Stalin was responsible for the killing or starvation of several million of Europeans whose lands his armies occupied during and after the Second World War. Japan's conquest and occupation of China during the period 1931-45 cost the lives of many millions of Chinese civilians. The Chinese "Cultural Revolution" of the 1960's likewise swept away millions of real or imagined opponents of the government of Mao Zedong, and indeed the total death toll, including those who died of starvation amid the chaos, may have exceeded twenty million. In the period 1975-79 more than one million Cambodians - some sources claim three million - out of a total population of seven million, were killed in a campaign masterminded by Pol Pot. And as recently as 1994, one million died in Rwanda, victims of tribal warfare, many of them hacked to death with machetes.

Clearly, the Holocaust was not unique in the sense of being the only case of mass murder in this century or in Jewish history. But there were unique aspects of it, just as there were of all other such campaigns. Some might claim that since the Holocaust was not the only episode of this type, it deserves less attention than it has received. On the contrary, the problem is not that the Holocaust has received too much attention, but that other episodes have received too little, and therefore, the impact of whatever lessons they might teach is lost.

The frequency of mass murder in the twentieth century suggests there are chronic problems that human society needs to confront if similar episodes are to be avoided in the future. Certainly every case of mass murder is in some respects unique, and as has been mentioned it is important to study each individually. But it is likewise important to see patterns.

The Holocaust took place more than fifty years ago. Why study it now?

Yes, Hitler's Holocaust is long over, and nothing can bring back the six million. But there are still important reasons for remembering. Recent surveys have shown that the preponderant majority of Americans believe that it is important for young people to learn about the Holocaust. That the Holocaust is today being widely taught in the United States (and in some other countries, notably Germany) is obvious. Whether it should be is another matter. What justifies the teaching of any historical subject is the sense that one can learn from it, as well as about it. And it is on this ground that the value of Holocaust study is best established.

Important lessons may be learned by studying the Holocaust, especially when this study is augmented by an awareness of the history of Antisemitism and of the modern tendency toward mass murder. One lesson has already been suggested: Neither the Holocaust nor any other campaign of mass murder should be seen as an aberration that is entirely unique. To simply dismiss each episode as an oddity that will never recur reduces concern and begs the question of why mass murder has so studded recent history.

Other lessons likewise stand out:

1. It is dangerous to allow vilification, stereotyping, and scapegoating of any group to go unchecked. Antisemitism, indeed all forms of bigotry, can have devastating consequences, and must not be shrugged off as trivial.
2. As not only the Holocaust but Jewish history in general shows, bigotry does not simply go away, but rather persists, unless it is combated.
3. Legal safeguards that insure personal security must be instituted and maintained for all social groups. No society or government has the right to endanger any group solely because it does not conform.
4. Wartime atrocity stories cannot simply be dismissed as propaganda. They may be true, as were reports of the Holocaust that were so widely discounted.
5. Persecuted and endangered groups must have a safe haven.
6. Attempts to define who belongs in a community or nation may have dangerous consequences. Invariably, some groups are excluded, to be less valued, less respected, and less supported.

Driven by these lessons, institutions and individuals have begun to act. Stereotyping of Jews and other groups, which was formerly so common that it was accepted as a fact of life, even by those who disapproved, is now widely frowned upon, and although obviously it continues it is far more muted than it was in the generations before the Holocaust.

There has also been a drive to replace stereotype with understanding. Especially since about 1960, there has been an ongoing effort to promote reconciliation between Jews and the various Christian churches, and many church leaders have spoken of a need to change attitudes. In both the religious and the secular worlds, the animosity and apathy associated with the Holocaust has been replaced by a desire to reach out.

Countless individuals have contributed to this effort, but none more than John XXIII. As pope (1958-63), the former Angelo Roncalli showed a real affection for the Jews. Early in his pontificate, he eliminated negative references to Jews from several Catholic prayers. Then, toward the end of his life, he took a move of fundamental importance, calling the Second Vatican Council to, among other things, redefine the attitude of the Catholic Church toward non-Christian faiths. In October 1965, two years after John's death, the council promulgated a declaration decrying "hatred, persecutions, displays of antisemitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone."

Catholic initiatives found parallels in several Protestant churches and the movement to eliminate anti-Jewish messages from Christianity has progressively gained momentum during the past few decades. The advance has been uneven, with some churches moving more rapidly than others, but most major churches have taken steps to purge themselves of doctrine and teachings that encourage hostility toward Jews.

The process of unlearning is also advancing in the secular world. Many developments might be mentioned, but one is

especially noteworthy, bearing in mind how the Holocaust came to be. As we have seen, from the mid-nineteenth century through the Nazi period racialism was extremely popular, not just in Germany but elsewhere. The shock of the Holocaust has helped bring about a dramatic shift. Today, racial "science" is generally dismissed as foolishness.

An awareness of the Holocaust has therefore resulted in meaningful change. But this does not mean that the process is complete or that all the lessons have been learned. It is up to a new generation to study the Holocaust and the broader history that explains it. Few if any historical episodes teach more, and what it teaches is valuable, even if often painful.

Forgotten history means forgotten lessons.