SUGGESTED TOPIC AREAS FOR A COURSE OF STUDY ON THE HOLOCAUST

The Museum has identified topic areas for you to consider while planning a course of study on the Holocaust. We recommend that you introduce your students to these topics even if you have limited time to teach about the Holocaust. An introduction to the topic areas is essential for providing students with a sense of the breadth of the history of the Holocaust. The essay that follows this page provides an overview of these topics.

1933–1939
Dictatorship under the Third Reich
Early Stages of Persecution
The First Concentration Camps

1939–1945
World War II in Europe
Murder of the Disabled ("Euthanasia" Program)
Persecution and Murder of Jews
Ghettos
Mobile Killing Squads (Einsatzgruppen)
Expansion of the Concentration Camp System
Killing Centers
Additional Victims of Nazi Persecution
Resistance
Rescue
United States/World Response
Death Marches
Liberation

POST 1945
Postwar Trials
Displaced Persons Camps and Emigration

In addition to these core topic areas, we recommend that, in your courses, you provide context for the events of the Holocaust by including information about anti-Semitism, Jewish life in Europe before the Holocaust, the aftermath of World War I, and the Nazi rise to power. Consult the annotated bibliography at the end of this publication for recommended readings.
HISTORY OF THE HOLOCAUST: AN OVERVIEW

On January 20, 1942, an extraordinary 90-minute meeting took place in a lakeside villa in the wealthy Wannsee district of Berlin. Fifteen high-ranking Nazi party and German government leaders gathered to coordinate logistics for carrying out “the final solution of the Jewish question.” Chairing the meeting was SS Lieutenant General Reinhard Heydrich, head of the powerful Reich Security Main Office, a central police agency that included the Secret State Police (the Gestapo). Heydrich convened the meeting on the basis of a memorandum he had received six months earlier from Adolf Hitler’s deputy, Hermann Göring, confirming his authorization to implement the “Final Solution.”

The “Final Solution” was the Nazi regime’s code name for the deliberate, planned mass murder of all European Jews. During the Wannsee meeting German government officials discussed “extermination” without hesitation or qualm. Heydrich calculated that 11 million European Jews from more than 20 countries would be killed under this heinous plan.

During the months before the Wannsee Conference, special units made up of SS, the elite guard of the Nazi state, and police personnel, known as Einsatzgruppen, slaughtered Jews in mass shootings on the territory of the Soviet Union that the Germans had occupied. Six weeks before the Wannsee meeting, the Nazis began to murder Jews at Chelmno, an agricultural estate located in that part of Poland annexed to Germany. Here SS and police personnel used sealed vans into which they pumped carbon monoxide gas to suffocate their victims. The Wannsee meeting served to sanction, coordinate, and expand the implementation of the “Final Solution” as state policy.

During 1942, trainload after trainload of Jewish men, women, and children were transported from countries all over Europe to Auschwitz, Treblinka, and four other major killing centers in German occupied Poland. By year’s end, about 4 million Jews were dead. During World War II (1939–1945), the Germans and their collaborators killed or caused the deaths of up to 6 million Jews. Hundreds of Jewish communities in Europe, some centuries old, disappeared forever. To convey the unimaginable, devastating scale of destruction, postwar writers referred to the murder of the European Jews as the “Holocaust.”

Centuries of religious prejudice against Jews in Christian Europe, reinforced by modern political anti-Semitism developing from a complex mixture of extreme nationalism, financial insecurity, fear of communism, and so-called race science, provide the backdrop for the Holocaust. Hitler and other Nazi ideologues regarded Jews as a dangerous “race” whose very existence threatened the biological purity and strength of the “superior Aryan race.” To secure the assistance of thousands of individuals to implement the “Final Solution,” the Nazi regime could and did exploit existing prejudice against Jews in Germany and the other countries that were conquered by or allied with Germany during World War II.

“While not all victims were Jews, all Jews were victims,” Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel has written. “Jews were destined for annihilation solely because they were born Jewish. They were doomed not because of something they had done or proclaimed or acquired but because of who they were, sons and daughters of Jewish people. As such they were sentenced to death collectively and individually...."
1933–1939
On January 30, 1933, Adolf Hitler was named chancellor, the most powerful position in the German government, by the aged President Hindenburg, who hoped Hitler could lead the nation out of its grave political and economic crisis. Hitler was the leader of the right-wing National Socialist German Workers Party (called the “Nazi party” for short). It was, by 1933, one of the strongest parties in Germany, even though—reflecting the country’s multiparty system—the Nazis had won only a plurality of 33 percent of the votes in the 1932 elections to the German parliament (Reichstag).

Once in power, Hitler moved quickly to end German democracy. He convinced his cabinet to invoke emergency clauses of the constitution that permitted the suspension of individual freedoms of press, speech, and assembly. Special security forces—the Gestapo, the Storm Troopers (SA), and the SS—murdered or arrested leaders of opposition political parties (Communists, socialists, and liberals). The Enabling Act of March 23, 1933—forced through a Reichstag already purged of many political opponents—gave dictatorial powers to Hitler.

Also in 1933, the Nazis began to put into practice their racial ideology. The Nazis believed that the Germans were “racially superior” and that there was a struggle for survival between them and “inferior races.” They saw Jews, Roma (Gypsies), and the handicapped as a serious biological threat to the purity of the “German (Aryan1) Race,” what they called the “master race.”

Jews, who numbered about 525,000 in Germany (less than one percent of the total population in 1933), were the principal target of Nazi hatred. The Nazis identified Jews as a race and defined this race as “inferior.” They also spewed hate-mongering propaganda that unfairly blamed Jews for Germany’s economic depression and the country’s defeat in World War I (1914–18). In 1933, new German laws forced Jews out of their civil service jobs, university and law court positions, and other areas of public life. In April 1933, a boycott of Jewish businesses was instituted. In 1935, laws proclaimed at Nuremberg made Jews second-class citizens. These Nuremberg Laws defined Jews, not by their religion or by how they wanted to identify themselves, but by the religious affiliation of their grandparents. Between 1937 and 1939, new anti-Jewish regulations segregated Jews further and made daily life very difficult for them: Jews could not attend public schools; go to theaters, cinemas, or vacation resorts; or reside or even walk in certain sections of German cities.

Also between 1937 and 1939, Jews increasingly were forced from Germany’s economic life: The Nazis either seized Jewish businesses and properties outright or forced Jews to sell them at bargain prices. In November 1938, the Nazis organized a riot (pogrom), known as Kristallnacht (the “Night of Broken Glass”). This attack against German and Austrian Jews included the physical destruction of synagogues and Jewish-owned stores, the arrest of Jewish men, the vandalism of homes, and the murder of individuals.

Although Jews were the main target of Nazi hatred, the Nazis persecuted other groups they viewed as racially or genetically “inferior.” Nazi racial ideology was buttressed by scientists who advocated “selective breeding” (eugenics) to “improve” the human race. Laws passed between 1933 and 1935 aimed to reduce the future number of genetic “inferiors” through involuntary sterilization programs: 320,000 to 350,000 individuals judged physically or mentally handicapped were subjected to surgical or radiation procedures so they could not have children. Supporters of sterilization also argued that the handicapped burdened the community with the costs of their care.

Many of Germany’s 30,000 Roma (Gypsies) were also eventually sterilized and prohibited, along with Blacks, from intermarrying with Germans. About 500 children of mixed African-German backgrounds were also sterilized. 2 New laws combined traditional prejudices with the racism of the Nazis, which defined Roma, by “race,” as “criminal and asocial.”

Another consequence of Hitler’s ruthless dictatorship in the 1930s was the arrest of political opponents and trade unionists and others the Nazis labeled “undesirables” and “enemies of the state.” Some 5,000 to 15,000 homosexuals were imprisoned in concentration camps; under the 1935 Nazisrevised criminal code, the mere denunciation of a man as “homosexual” could result in arrest, trial, and conviction. Jehovah’s Witnesses, who numbered at least 25,000 in Germany, were banned as an organization as early as April 1933, because the beliefs of this religious group prohibited them from swearing any oath to the state or serving in the German military. Their literature was confiscated, and they lost jobs, unemployment benefits, pensions, and all social welfare benefits. Many Witnesses were sent to prisons and concentration camps in Nazi Germany, and their children were sent to juvenile detention homes and orphanages.

Between 1933 and 1936, thousands of people, mostly political prisoners, were imprisoned in concentration camps, while several thousand German Roma (Gypsies) were confined in special municipal camps. The first systematic roundup of German and Austrian Jews occurred after Kristallnacht, when approximately 30,000 Jewish men were deported to Dachau and other concentration camps, and several hundred Jewish women were sent to local jails.

1 The term “Aryan” originally referred to peoples speaking Indo-European languages. The Nazis perverted its meaning to support racist ideas by viewing those of Germanic background as prime examples of Aryan stock, which they considered racially superior. For the Nazis, the typical
2 Aryan was blond, blue-eyed, and tall.
The wave of arrests in 1938 also included several thousand German and Austrian Roma (Gypsies). Between 1933 and 1939, about half the German-Jewish population and more than two-thirds of Austrian Jews (1938–39) fled Nazi persecution. They emigrated mainly to the United States, Palestine, elsewhere in Europe (where many would be later trapped by Nazi conquests during the war), Latin America, and Japanese-occupied Shanghai (which required no visas for entry). Jews who remained under Nazi rule were either unwilling to uproot themselves or unable to obtain visas, sponsors in host countries, or funds for emigration. Most foreign countries, including the United States, Canada, Britain, and France, were unwilling to admit very large numbers of refugees.

**JANUARY 30, 1933**
German President Paul von Hindenburg appointed Adolf Hitler chancellor. At the time, Hitler was leader of the National Socialist German Workers’ Party (Nazi party).

**FEBRUARY 27–28, 1933**
The German parliament (Reichstag) building burned down under mysterious circumstances. The government treated it as an act of terrorism.

**FEBRUARY 28, 1933**
Hitler convinced President von Hindenburg to invoke an emergency clause in the Weimar Constitution. The German parliament then passed the Decree of the Reich President for the Protection of Nation (Volk) and State, popularly known as the Reichstag Fire Decree. The decree suspended the civil rights provisions in the existing German constitution, including freedom of speech, assembly, and press, and formed the basis for the incarceration of potential opponents of the Nazis without benefit of trial or judicial proceeding.

**MARCH 22, 1933**
The SS (Schutzstaffel), Hitler’s “elite guard,” established a concentration camp outside the town of Dachau, Germany, for political opponents of the regime. It was the only concentration camp to remain in operation from 1933 until 1945. By 1934, the SS had taken over administration of the entire Nazi concentration camp system.

**MARCH 23, 1933**
The German parliament passed the Enabling Act, which empowered Hitler to establish a dictatorship in Germany.

**APRIL 1, 1933**
The Nazis organized a nationwide boycott of Jewish-owned businesses in Germany. Many local boycotts continued throughout much of the 1930s.

**APRIL 7, 1933**
The Nazi government passed the Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service, which excluded Jews and political opponents from university and governmental positions. Similar laws enacted in the following weeks affected Jewish lawyers, judges, doctors, and teachers.

**MAY 10, 1933**
Nazi party members, students, teachers, and others burned books written by Jews, political opponents of Nazis, and the intellectual avant-garde during public rallies across Germany.

**JULY 14, 1933**
The Nazi government enacted the Law on the Revocation of Naturalization, which deprived foreign and stateless Jews as well as Roma (Gypsies) of German citizenship. The Nazi government enacted the Law for the Prevention of Offspring with Hereditary Diseases, which mandated the forced sterilization of certain physically or mentally impaired individuals. The law institutionalized the eugenic concept of “life undeserving of life” and provided the basis for the involuntary sterilization of the disabled, Roma (Gypsies), “social misfits,” and black people residing in Germany.

**JUNE 30–JULY 1, 1934**
In what came to be called “the Night of the Long Knives,” on Hitler’s orders members of the Nazi party and police murdered members of the Nazi leadership, army, and others. Hitler declared the killings legal and necessary to achieve the Nazi party’s aims. The murders were reported throughout Germany and in other countries.

**AUGUST 2, 1934**
German President von Hindenburg died. Hitler became Führer in addition to his position as chancellor. Because there was no legal or constitutional limit to Hitler’s power as Führer, he became absolute dictator of Germany.

**OCTOBER 7, 1934**
In standardized letters sent to the government, Jehovah’s Witness congregations from all over Germany declared their political neutrality but also affirmed defiance of Nazi restrictions on the practice of their religion.

**APRIL 1, 1935**
The Nazi government banned the Jehovah’s Witness organization. The Nazis persecuted Jehovah’s Witnesses because of their religious refusal to swear allegiance to the state.

**JUNE 28, 1935**
The German Ministry of Justice revised Paragraphs 175 and 175a of the criminal code to criminalize all homosexual acts between men. The revision provided the police broader means for prosecuting homosexual men.

**SEPTEMBER 15, 1935**
The Nazi government decreed the Reich Citizenship Law and the Law for the Protection of the German Blood and Honor. These Nuremberg “racial laws” made Jews second-class citizens. They prohibited sexual relations and intermarriage between Jews and “persons of German or related blood.” The Nazi government later applied the laws to Roma (Gypsies) and to black people residing in Germany.

**JULY 12, 1936**
Prisoners and civilian workers began construction of the concentration camp Sachsenhausen at Oranienburg near Berlin. By September, German authorities had imprisoned about 1,000 people in the camp.

**AUGUST 1–16, 1936**
Athletes and spectators from countries around the world attended the Summer Olympic Games in Berlin, Germany. The Olympic Games were a propaganda success for the Nazi state. The Nazis made every effort to portray Germany as a respectable member of the international community and soft pedaled their persecution of the Jews. They removed anti-Jewish signs from public display and restrained anti-Jewish activities. In response to pressure from foreign Olympic delegations, Germany also included Jews or part-Jews on its Olympic team.

**MARCH 12–13, 1938**
German troops invaded Austria, and Germany incorporated Austria into the German Reich in what was called the Anschluss.

**JULY 6–15, 1938**
Delegates from 32 countries and representatives from refugee aid organizations attended the Evian Conference at Evian, France, to discuss immigration quotas for refugees fleeing Nazi Germany. However, the United States and most other countries were unwilling to ease their immigration restrictions.

**SEPTEMBER 30, 1938**
Britain, France, Italy, and Germany signed the Munich Pact, forcing Czechoslovakia to cede its border areas to the German Reich.

**OCTOBER 1–10, 1938**
German troops occupied the Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia under the stipulations of the Munich Pact.

**NOVEMBER 9–10, 1938**
In a nationwide pogrom called Kristallnacht (“Night of Broken Glass”), the Nazis and their collaborators burned synagogues, looted Jewish homes and businesses, and killed at least 91 Jews. The Gestapo, supported by local uniformed police, arrested approximately 30,000 Jewish men and imprisoned them in the Dachau, Sachsenhausen, Buchenwald, and Mauthausen concentration camps. Several hundred Jewish women also were imprisoned in local jails.
On September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland and World War II began. Within weeks, the Polish army was defeated, and the Nazis began their campaign to destroy Polish culture and enslave the Polish people, whom they viewed as “subhuman.” Killing Polish leaders was the first step: German soldiers carried out massacres of university professors, artists, writers, politicians, and many Catholic priests. To create new living space for the “superior Germanic race,” large segments of the Polish population were resettled, and German families moved into the emptied lands. Other Poles, including many Jews, were imprisoned in concentration camps. The Nazis also “kidnapped” as many as 50,000 “Aryan-looking” Polish children from their parents and took them to Germany to be adopted by German families. Many of these children were later rejected as not capable of Germanization and were sent to special children’s camps where some died of starvation, lethal injection, and disease.

As the war began in 1939, Hitler initialed an order to kill institutionalized, handicapped patients deemed “incurable.” Special commissions of physicians reviewed questionnaires filled out by all state hospitals and then decided if a patient should be killed. The doomed were then transferred to six institutions in Germany and Austria where specially constructed gas chambers were used to kill them. After public protests in 1941, the Nazi leadership continued this “euthanasia” program in secret. Babies, small children, and other victims were thereafter killed by lethal injection and pills and by forced starvation.

The “euthanasia” program contained all the elements later required for mass murder of European Jews and Roma (Gypsies): a decision to kill, specially trained personnel, the apparatus for killing by gas, and the use of euphemistic language like “euthanasia” that psychologically distanced the murderer from their victims and hid the criminal character of the killings from the public. In 1940 German forces continued their conquest of much of Europe, easily defeating Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, France, Yugoslavia, and Greece. On June 22, 1941, the German army invaded the Soviet Union and by late November was approaching Moscow. In the meantime, Italy, Romania, and Hungary had joined the Axis powers led by Germany and were opposed by the main Allied powers (British Commonwealth, Free France, the United States, and the Soviet Union).

In the months following Germany’s invasion of the Soviet Union, Jews, political leaders, Communists, and many Roma (Gypsies) were killed in mass shootings. Most of those killed were Jews. These murders were carried out at improvised sites throughout the Soviet Union by members of mobile killing squads (Einsatzgruppen) who followed in the wake of the invading German army. The most famous of these sites was Babi Yar, near Kiev, where an estimated 33,000 persons, mostly Jews, were murdered over two days. German terror extended to institutionalized handicapped and psychiatric patients in the Soviet Union; it also resulted in the death of more than 3 million Soviet prisoners of war.

World War II brought major changes to the concentration camp system. Large numbers of new prisoners, deported from all German-occupied countries, now flooded the camps. Often entire groups were committed to the camps, such as members of underground resistance organizations who were rounded up in a sweep across Western Europe under the 1941 Night and Fog decree. To accommodate the massive increase in the number of prisoners, hundreds of new camps were established in occupied territories of eastern and western Europe.

During the war, ghettos, transit camps, and forced-labor camps, in addition to the concentration camps, were created by the Germans and their collaborators to imprison Jews, Roma (Gypsies), and other victims of racial and ethnic hatred as well as political opponents and resistance fighters. Following the invasion of Poland, 3 million Polish Jews were forced into approximately 400 newly established ghettos where they were segregated from the rest of the population. Large numbers of Jews also were deported from other countries and countries, including Germany, to ghettos and camps in Poland and German-occupied territories further east.

In Polish cities under Nazi occupation, like Warsaw and Lodz, Jews were confined in sealed ghettos where starvation, overcrowding, exposure to cold, and contagious diseases killed tens of thousands of people. In Warsaw and elsewhere, ghettoized Jews made every effort, often at great risk, to maintain their cultural, communal, and religious lives. The ghettos also provided a forced-labor pool for the Germans, and many forced laborers (who worked on road gangs, in construction, or at other hard labor related to the German war effort) died from exhaustion or maltreatment.

Between 1942 and 1944, the Germans moved to eliminate the ghettos in occupied Poland and elsewhere, deporting ghetto residents to “extermination camps”—killing centers equipped with gassing facilities—located in Poland. After the meeting in late January 1942 at a villa in the Berlin suburb of Wannsee informing senior German government officials of the decision to implement “the final solution of the Jewish question,” Jews from western Europe also were sent to killing centers in the East.

2 These children, called “the Rhineland bastards” by Germans, were the offspring of German women and African soldiers from French colonies who were stationed in the 1920s in the Rhineland, a demilitarized zone the Allies established after World War I as a buffer between Germany and western Europe.

3 On March 11, 1938, Hitler sent his army into Austria, and on March 13, the incorporation (Anschluss) of Austria with the German empire (Reich) was proclaimed in Vienna. Most of the population welcomed the Anschluss and expressed their fervor in widespread riots and attacks against the Austrian Jews numbering 180,000 (90 percent of whom lived in Vienna).
The six killing sites, chosen because of their closeness to rail lines and their location in semi rural areas, were at Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka, Chelmno, Majdanek, and Auschwitz-Birkenau. Chelmno was the first camp in which mass executions were carried out by gas piped into mobile gas vans; at least 152,000 persons were killed there between December 1941 and March 1943, and between June and July 1944. A killing center using gas chambers operated at Belzec, where about 600,000 persons were killed between May 1942 and August 1943. Sobibor opened in May 1942 and closed following a rebellion of the prisoners on October 14, 1943; about 250,000 persons had already been killed by gassing at Sobibor. Treblinka opened in July 1942 and closed in November 1943; a revolt by the prisoners in early August 1943 destroyed much of that facility. At least 750,000 persons were killed at Treblinka, physically the largest of the killing centers. Almost all of the victims at Chelmno, Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka were Jews; a few were Roma (Gypsies), Poles, and Soviet POWs. Very few individuals survived these four killing centers where most victims were murdered immediately upon arrival. Auschwitz-Birkenau, which also served as a concentration camp and slave labor camp, became the killing center where the largest numbers of European Jews and Roma (Gypsies) were killed. After an experimental gassing there in September 1941—of 250 malnourished and ill Polish prisoners and 600 Soviet POWs—mass murder became a daily routine; more than 1 million people were killed at Auschwitz-Birkenau, 9 out of 10 of them Jews. In addition, Roma, Soviet POWs, and ill prisoners of all nationalities died in the gas chambers there. Between May 15 and July 9, 1944, nearly 440,000 Jews were deported from Hungary in more than 140 trains, overwhelmingly to Auschwitz. This was probably the largest single mass deportation during the Holocaust. A similar system was implemented at Majdanek, which also doubled as a concentration camp, and where between 170,000 and 235,000 persons were killed in the gas chambers or died from malnutrition, brutality, and disease.

The methods of murder were similar in the killing centers, which were operated by the SS. Jewish victims arrived in railroad freight cars and passenger trains, mostly from ghettos and camps in occupied Poland, but also from almost every other eastern and western European country. On arrival, men were separated from women and children. Prisoners were forced to undress and hand over all valuables. They were then forced naked into the gas chambers, which were disguised as shower rooms, and either carbon monoxide or Zyklon B (a form of crystalline prussic acid, also used as an insecticide in some camps) was used to asphyxiate them. The minority selected for forced labor were, after initial quarantine, vulnerable to malnutrition, exposure, epidemics, medical experiments, and brutality; many perished as a result.

The Germans carried out their systematic murderous activities with the active help of local collaborators in many countries and the acquiescence or indifference of millions of bystanders. However, there were instances of organized resistance. For example, in the fall of 1943, the Danish resistance, with the support of the local population, rescued nearly the entire Jewish community in Denmark by smuggling them via a dramatic boatlift to safety in neutral Sweden. Individuals in many other countries also risked their lives to save Jews and other individuals subject to Nazi persecution. One of the most famous was Raoul Wallenberg, a Swedish diplomat who played a significant role in some of the rescue efforts that saved the lives of tens of thousands of Hungarian Jews in 1944. Resistance existed in almost every concentration camp and ghetto of Europe. In addition to the armed revolts at Sobibor and Treblinka, Jewish resistance in the Warsaw ghetto led to a courageous uprising in April and May 1943, despite a predictable doomed outcome because of superior German force. In general, rescue or aid to Holocaust victims was not a priority of resistance organizations, whose principal goal was to fight the war against the Germans. Nonetheless, such groups and Jewish partisans (resistance fighters) sometimes cooperated with each other to save Jews. On April 19, 1943, for instance, members of the National Committee for the Defense of Jews, in cooperation with Christian railroad workers and the general underground in Belgium, attacked a train leaving the Belgian transit camp of Malines headed for Auschwitz and succeeded in assisting Jewish deportees to escape.

The U.S. government did not pursue a policy of rescue for victims of Nazism during World War II. Like their British counterparts, U.S. political and military leaders argued that winning the war was the top priority and would bring an end to Nazi terror. Once the war began, security concerns, reinforced in part by anti-Semitism, influenced the U.S. State Department (led by Secretary of State Cordell Hull) and the U.S. government to do little to ease restrictions on entry visas. In January 1944, President Roosevelt established the War Refugee Board within the U.S. Treasury Department to facilitate the rescue of imperiled refugees. Fort Ontario in Oswego, New York, began to serve as an ostensibly free port for refugees from the territories liberated by the Allies.

After the war turned against Germany, and the Allied armies approached German soil in late 1944, the SS decided to evacuate outlying concentration camps. The Germans tried to cover up the evidence of genocide and deported prisoners to camps inside Germany to prevent their liberation. Many inmates died during the long journeys on foot known as “death marches.” During the final days, in the spring of 1945, conditions in the remaining concentration camps exacted a terrible toll in human lives. Even concentration camps such as Bergen-Belsen, never intended for extermination, became death traps for thousands, including Anne Frank, who died there of typhus in March 1945. In May 1945, Nazi Germany collapsed, the SS guards fled, and the camps ceased to exist.
Despite concerns among some historians that, operationally, Majdanek resembled concentration camps more than it did killing centers, most scholars include it among the killing centers because of the large number of prisoners who died there and the use of poison gas in the killing process.

MARCH 14, 1939
Slovakia declared itself an independent state under protection of Nazi Germany.

MARCH 15, 1939
German troops occupied the Czech lands and established the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia.

MAY 13–JUNE 17, 1939
Cuba and the United States refused to accept more than 900 refugees—almost all of whom were Jewish—aboard the ocean liner St. Louis, forcing its return to Europe.

AUGUST 23, 1939
The Soviet and German governments signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop Non-Aggression Pact in which they agreed to divide up eastern Europe, including Poland; the Baltic states of Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia; and parts of Romania.

SEPTEMBER 1, 1939
German troops invaded Poland, marking the beginning of World War II.

SEPTEMBER 3, 1939
Britain and France fulfilled their promise to protect Poland’s border and declared war on Germany.

SEPTEMBER 28, 1939
In a secret amendment to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the German and Soviet governments outlined their plans to partition Poland.

OCTOBER 1939
Hitler initialed an order to kill those Germans whom the Nazis deemed “incurable” and hence “unworthy of life.” Health care professionals sent tens of thousands of institutionalized mentally and physically disabled people to central “euthanasia” killing centers where they killed them by lethal injection or in gas chambers.

OCTOBER 26, 1939
Germany annexed the former Polish regions of Upper Silesia, Pomerania, West Prussia, Poznan, and the independent city of Danzig. Those areas of occupied Poland not annexed by Germany or the Soviet Union were placed under a German civilian administration and were called the General Government (Generalgouvernement).

NOVEMBER 12, 1939
German authorities began the forced deportation of Jews from West Prussia, Poznan, Danzig, and Lodz (also in annexed Poland) to locations in the General Government.

NOVEMBER 23, 1939
German authorities required that, by December 1, 1939, all Jews residing in the General Government wear white badges with a blue Star of David.

APRIL 9–JUNE 10, 1940
German troops invaded, defeated, and occupied Denmark and Norway.

JUNE 30, 1940
German authorities ordered the first major Jewish ghetto, in Lodz, to be sealed off, confining at least 160,000 people in the ghetto. Henceforth, all Jews living in Lodz had to reside in the ghetto and could not leave without German authorization.

MAY 10, 1940
German troops invaded the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, and France. By June 22, Germany occupied all of these regions except for southern (Vichy) France.

MAY 20, 1940
SS authorities established the Auschwitz concentration camp (Auschwitz I) outside the Polish city of Oswiecim.

NOVEMBER 15, 1940
German authorities ordered the Warsaw ghetto in the General Government sealed off. It was the largest ghetto in both area and population. The Germans confined more than 350,000 Jews—about 30 percent of the city’s population—in about 2.4 percent of the city’s total area.

APRIL 6, 1941
German and other Axis forces (Italy, Bulgaria, and Hungary) invaded Yugoslavia and Greece.

JUNE 22, 1941
Germany and its Axis forces invaded the Soviet Union in Operation Barbarossa. German mobile killing squads called Einsatzgruppen were assigned to identify, concentrate, and kill Jews behind the front lines. By the spring of 1943, the Einsatzgruppen had killed more than a million Jews and an undetermined number of partisans, Roma (Gypsies), and officials of the Soviet state and the Soviet Communist party. In 1941–42, some 70,000–80,000 Jews fled eastward, evading the first wave of murder perpetrated by the German invaders.

JULY 20, 1941
German authorities established a ghetto in Minsk in the German-occupied Soviet territories and, by July 25, concentrated all Jews from the area in the ghetto.

**JULY 31, 1941**
Reich Marshal Hermann Göring charged SS-Gruppenführer Reinhard Heydrich, head of the Security Police and the SD (Security Service), to take measures for the implementation of the “final solution of the Jewish question.” The “Final Solution” was a euphemism for the mass murder of the Jewish population of Europe.

**AUGUST 15, 1941**
By order of German authorities, the Kovno ghetto, with approximately 30,000 Jewish inhabitants, was sealed off.

**SEPTEMBER 3, 1941**
At the Auschwitz concentration camp, SS functionaries performed their first gassing experiments using Zyklon B. The victims were Soviet prisoners of war and non-Jewish Polish inmates.

**SEPTEMBER 6, 1941**
German authorities established two ghettos in Vilna in German-occupied Lithuania. German and Lithuanian units killed tens of thousands of Jews in the nearby Ponary woods.

**SEPTEMBER 15, 1941**
The Nazi government decreed that Jews over the age of six who resided in Germany had to wear a yellow Star of David on their outer clothing in public at all times.

**SEPTEMBER 29–30, 1941**
German SS, police, and military units shot an estimated 33,000 persons, mostly Jews, at Babi Yar, a ravine on the outskirts of Kiev (in Ukraine). In the following months, German units shot thousands of Jews, Roma (Gypsies), and Soviet prisoners of war at Babi Yar.

**OCTOBER 15, 1941**
German authorities began the deportation of Jews from the German Reich to the ghettos of Lodz, Riga, and Minsk.

**OCTOBER 28, 1941**
After requiring all Kovno ghetto inhabitants to assemble at Demokratu Square, German and Lithuanian units took more than one-third of the ghetto’s population—some 9,200 people—to Fort IX and shot them in what was called the “Great Action.”

**OCTOBER–NOVEMBER 1941**
SS functionaries began preparations for Einsatz Reinhard (Operation Reinhard; often referred to as Aktion Reinhard), with the goal of murdering the Jews in the General Government. Preparations included construction of the killing centers Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka in the territory of the General Government.

**NOVEMBER 24, 1941**
German authorities established the Theresienstadt (also known as Terezin) ghetto, in the German controlled Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia.

**NOVEMBER 26, 1941**
SS authorities established a second camp at Auschwitz, called Auschwitz-Birkenau or Auschwitz II. The camp was originally designated for the incarceration of large numbers of Soviet prisoners of war but later was used as a killing center.

**DECEMBER 1, 1941**
Einsatzkommando 3, a subunit of Einsatzgruppe A that operated in Lithuania, reported that its members had killed 136,442 Jews since June 1941.

**DECEMBER 7, 1941**
Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. The next morning, the United States declared war on Japan.

**DECEMBER 8, 1941**
Gassing operations began at Chelmno, one of six Nazi killing centers. Situated in the Polish territory annexed by Germany, Chelmno closed in March 1943 and resumed its killing operations during two months in the early summer of 1944. SS and German civilian officials killed at least 152,000 Jews and an undetermined number of Roma (Gypsies) and Poles at Chelmno using special mobile gas vans.

**DECEMBER 11, 1941**
Germany and Italy declared war on the United States.

**JANUARY 16, 1942**
German authorities began the deportation of Jews from the Lodz ghetto to Chelmno.

**JANUARY 20, 1942**
Senior Nazi officials met at a villa in the outskirts of Berlin at the Wannsee Conference to discuss and coordinate implementation of the “Final Solution.”

**MARCH 17, 1942**
At the Belzec killing center, an SS special detachment began using gas chambers to kill people. Between March 17 and December 1942, approximately 600,000 people, mostly Jews but also an undetermined number of Roma (Gypsies), were killed at Belzec.

**MARCH 27, 1942**
German authorities began systematic deportations of Jews from France. By the end of August 1944, the Germans had deported more than 75,000 Jews from France to camps in the East, above all, to the Auschwitz-Birkenau killing center in occupied Poland, where most of them perished.

**MARCH–APRIL 1942**

German SS and police units deported Jews from Lublin, in the General Government, to Belzec, where they were killed. The Lublin deportations were the first major deportations carried out under Operation Reinhard, the code name for the German plan to kill more than 2 million Jews living in the General Government of occupied Poland.

**MAY 1942**

After trial gassings in April, an SS special detachment began gassing operations at the Sobibor killing center in early May. By November 1943, the special detachment had killed approximately 250,000 Jews at Sobibor.

**MAY 4, 1942**

SS officials performed the first selection of victims for gassing at the Auschwitz-Birkenau killing center. Weak, sick, and “unfit” prisoners were selected and housed in an isolation ward prior to being killed in the gas chambers. Between May 1940 and January 1945, more than one million people were killed or died at the Auschwitz camp complex. Close to 865,000 were never registered and most likely were selected for gassing immediately upon arrival. Nine out of ten of those who died at the Auschwitz complex were Jewish.

**MAY 31, 1942**

German authorities opened the I.G. Farben labor camp at Auschwitz III (also known as Monowitz or Buna), situated near the main camp complex at Auschwitz.

**JULY 15, 1942**

German authorities began deportations of Dutch Jews from the Westerbork transit camp in the Netherlands to Auschwitz. By September 13, 1944, over 100 trains had carried more than 100,000 people to killing centers and concentration camps in the German Reich and the General Government.

**JULY 22, 1942**

Between July 22 and September 12, German SS and police authorities, assisted by auxiliaries, deported approximately 300,000 Jews from the Warsaw ghetto to killing centers and concentration camps. Of that number, about 265,000 Jews were sent to the Treblinka killing center where they were murdered.

**JULY 23, 1942**

Gassing operations began at the Treblinka killing center. Between July 1942 and November 1943, SS special detachments at Treblinka murdered an estimated 750,000 Jews and at least 2,000 Roma (Gypsies).

**AUGUST 4, 1942**

German authorities began systematic deportations of Jews from Belgium. The deportations continued until the end of July 1944. The Germans deported more than 25,000 Jews, about half of Belgium’s Jewish population, to the Auschwitz-Birkenau killing center in occupied Poland, where most of them perished.

**JANUARY 18–22, 1943**

SS and police units deported more than 5,000 Jews from the Warsaw ghetto to the Treblinka killing center. Members of the Jewish Fighting Organization (Zydowska Organizacja Bojowa, or ZOB) fought against the Germans in armed revolt as Jews were rounded up for deportation.

**MARCH 15, 1943**

German SS, police, and military units began the deportation of Jews from Salonika, Greece, to Auschwitz. Between March 20 and August 18, more than 50,000 Greek Jews arrived at the Auschwitz camp complex. SS staff killed most of the deportees in the gas chambers at Birkenau.

**APRIL 19–MAY 16, 1943**

In what is called the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, Jewish fighters resisted the German attempt to liquidate the ghetto. German SS and police units deported many of those who survived the armed revolt to Treblinka, and sent others to Majdanek and forced labor camps at Trawniki and Poniatowa in the General Government. Some resistance fighters escaped from the ghetto and joined partisan groups in the forests around Warsaw. The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was the first mass revolt in Nazi-occupied Europe.

**JUNE 21, 1943**

Heinrich Himmler, leader of the SS, ordered the liquidation of all ghettos in the Baltic states and Belorussia (Reich Commissariat Ostland) and the deportation of all Jews to concentration camps.

**AUGUST 2, 1943**

Jewish prisoners revolted at the Treblinka killing center. Although more than 300 prisoners escaped, most were caught and killed by German SS and police units assisted by army troops. The SS special detachment forced surviving prisoners to remove all remaining traces of the camp’s existence. After the killing center was dismantled in November 1943, the special detachment shot the remaining prisoners.

**SEPTEMBER 15, 1943**

SS authorities converted the Kovno ghetto into a concentration camp (Concentration Camp Kauen) under the direction of SS Captain Wilhelm Goecke.

**SEPTEMBER 23, 1943**
SS authorities ordered the final deportation of Jews from the Vilna ghetto. SS and police units in Vilna deported 4,000 Jews to the Sobibor killing center and evacuated approximately 3,700 to labor camps in German-occupied Estonia.

**OCTOBER 14, 1943**
Jewish prisoners at the Sobibor killing center began an armed revolt. Approximately 300 escaped. German SS and police units, with assistance from German military units, recaptured more than 100 and killed them. After the revolt, SS special detachments closed and dismantled the killing center.

**OCTOBER 21, 1943**
German authorities declared the Minsk ghetto officially liquidated after they murdered the remaining 2,000 Jews.

**NOVEMBER 3–4, 1943**
German SS and police units implemented Operation Harvest Festival. The purpose of Harvest Festival was to liquidate several labor camps in the Lublin area. During Harvest Festival, German SS and police units killed at least 42,000 Jews at Majdanek, Trawniki, and Poniatowa.

**MARCH 19, 1944**
German military units occupied Hungary.

**MAY 15–JULY 9, 1944**
Hungarian gendarmerie (rural police units), under the guidance of German SS officials, deported nearly 430,000 Jews from Hungary. Most were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau where SS staff immediately killed about half of them in gas chambers.

**JUNE 6, 1944**
D Day. British and American troops launched an invasion of France.

**JUNE 22, 1944**
A massive Soviet offensive destroyed the German front in Belorussia.

**JULY 8–12, 1944**
As the Soviet army neared, SS authorities liquidated the Kauen concentration camp, transferring 6,000 Jews to the Stutthof and Dachau concentration camps in the German Reich.

**JULY 22, 1944**
SS authorities evacuated most of the remaining prisoners from Majdanek westward to evade the advancing Soviet army.

**JULY 23, 1944**
Soviet troops liberated Majdanek. Surprised by the rapid Soviet advance, the Germans failed to destroy the camp and the evidence of mass murder.

**AUGUST 7–30, 1944**
SS and police officialsliquidated the Lodz ghetto and deported approximately 60,000 Jews and an undetermined number of Roma (Gypsies) to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

**AUGUST 28/29–OCTOBER 27, 1944**
Members of the Slovak resistance revolted against the German-supported Slovakian government. Between September and October, German SS and police officials, assisted by German military units and Slovak fascist paramilitary units, deported approximately 10,000 Slovak Jews to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

**OCTOBER 6, 1944**
At Auschwitz-Birkenau, the Sonderkommando (special detachment of Jewish prisoners deployed to remove corpses from the gas chambers and burn them) blew up Crematorium IV and killed the guards. About 250 participants of the revolt died in battle with SS and police units. The SS and police units shot 200 more members of the Sonderkommando after the battle was over.

**OCTOBER 30, 1944**
The last transport of Jews from Theresienstadt (Terezin) arrived at Auschwitz. During October, SS officials deported approximately 18,000 Jews to the Auschwitz camp complex. Most of them were killed in the gas chambers at Birkenau.

**NOVEMBER 25, 1944**
The SS began to demolish the gas chambers and crematoria at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

**JANUARY 17, 1945**
As Soviet troops approached, SS units evacuated prisoners in the Auschwitz camp complex, marching them on foot toward the interior of the German Reich. The forced evacuations came to be called “death marches.”

**JANUARY 27, 1945**
Soviet troops liberated about 8,000 prisoners left behind at the Auschwitz camp complex.

**APRIL 11, 1945**
U.S. troops liberated more than 20,000 prisoners at Buchenwald.

**APRIL 29, 1945**
U.S. troops liberated approximately 32,000 prisoners at Dachau.

**APRIL 30, 1945**
Hitler committed suicide in his bunker in Berlin.
MAY 2, 1945
German units in Berlin surrendered to Soviet forces.

MAY 5, 1945
U.S. troops liberated more than 17,000 prisoners at Mauthausen concentration camp and more than 20,000 prisoners at the Gusen concentration camps in the annexed Austrian territory of the German Reich.

MAY 7–9, 1945
German armed forces surrendered unconditionally in the West on May 7 and in the East on May 9. Allied and Soviet forces proclaimed May 8, 1945, to be Victory in Europe Day (V-E Day).

AUGUST 3, 1945
United States special envoy Earl Harrison made public a report to President Truman on the treatment of Jewish displaced persons (DPs) in Germany. Following World War II, several hundred thousand Jewish survivors were unable or unwilling to return to their home countries. Harrison’s report contained a strong indictment of Allied military policies, underscored the plight of Jewish DPs, and led eventually to improved conditions for them in the American zone of occupied Germany.

SEPTEMBER 2, 1945
Japan surrendered. World War II officially ended.
AFTERMATH OF THE HOLOCAUST

The Allied victors of World War II (Great Britain, France, the United States, and the Soviet Union) faced two immediate problems following the surrender of Nazi Germany in May 1945: to bring Nazi war criminals to justice and to provide for displaced persons (DPs) and refugees stranded in Allied-occupied Germany and Austria.

Following the war, the best-known war crimes trial was the trial of “major” war criminals, held at the Palace of Justice in Nuremberg, Germany, between November 1945 and August 1946. Under the auspices of the International Military Tribunal (IMT), which consisted of prosecutors and judges from the four occupying powers (Great Britain, France, the Soviet Union, and the United States), leading officials of the Nazi regime were prosecuted for war crimes. The IMT sentenced 13 of those convicted to death. Seven more defendants were sentenced to life imprisonment or to prison terms ranging from 10 to 20 years. One defendant committed suicide before the trial began. Three of the defendants were acquitted. The judges also found three of six Nazi organizations (the SS, the Gestapo-SD, and the Leadership Corps of the Nazi Party) to be criminal organizations.

In the three years following this major trial, 12 subsequent trials were conducted under the auspices of the IMT but before U.S. military tribunals. The proceedings were directed at the prosecution of second- and third-ranking officials of the Nazi regime. They included concentration camp administrators; commanders of the Einsatzgruppen (mobile killing units); physicians and public health officials; the SS leadership; German army field commanders and staff officers; officials in the justice, interior, and foreign ministries; and senior administrators of industrial concerns that used concentration camp laborers, including I. G. Farben and the Flick concern.

In addition, each occupying power (Great Britain, France, the United States, and the Soviet Union) conducted trials of Nazi offenders captured in its respective zone of occupation or accused of crimes perpetrated in that zone of occupation. The U.S. military authorities conducted the trials in the American zone at the site of the Nazi concentration camp Dachau. In general, the defendants in these trials were the staff and guard units at concentration camps and other camps located in the zone and people accused of crimes against Allied military and civilian personnel.

Those German officials and collaborators who committed crimes within a specific location or country were generally returned to the nation on whose territory the crimes were committed and were tried by national tribunals. Perhaps the most famous of these cases was the trial in 1947, in Cracow, Poland, of Rudolf Höß, the commandant of Auschwitz. Trials of German war criminals and their collaborators were conducted during the late 1940s and early 1950s in Poland, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, and the Soviet Union. After the establishment of West Germany in 1949, many former Nazis received relatively lenient treatment by the courts. Courts in West Germany ruled the offenders were not guilty because they were obeying orders from their superior officers. Some Nazi criminals were acquitted and returned to normal lives in German society, a number of them taking jobs in the business world. Many war criminals, however, were never brought to trial or punished. In 1958, the Federal Republic of Germany established a Central Agency for the Investigation of National Socialist Violent Crimes to streamline the investigation of Nazi offenders living in West Germany. These efforts, which continue to this day, led to some significant proceedings such as the Frankfurt Trial of Auschwitz camp personnel in the 1960s. The investigation of Nazi offenders residing in the United States began in earnest during the late 1970s and continues to this day. Even as the Allies moved to bring Nazi offenders to justice, the looming refugee crisis threatened to overwhelm the resources of the Allied powers. During World War II, the Nazis uprooted millions of people. Within months of Germany’s surrender in May 1945, the Allies repatriated more than 6 million (DPs) to their home countries.

Some 250,000 Jewish DPs, including most of the Jewish survivors of concentration camps, were unable or unwilling to return to Eastern Europe because of postwar anti-Semitism and the destruction of their communities during the Holocaust. Many of those who did return feared for their lives. Many Holocaust survivors found themselves in territory liberated by the Anglo-American armies and were housed in DP camps that the Allies established in Germany, Austria, and Italy. They were joined by a flow of refugees, including Holocaust survivors, migrating from points of liberation in Eastern Europe and the Soviet-occupied zones of Germany and Austria. Most Jewish DPs hoped to leave Europe for Palestine or the United States, but the United States was still governed by severely restrictive immigration legislation, and the British, who administered Palestine under a mandate from the defunct League of Nations, severely restricted Jewish immigration for fear of antagonizing the Arab residents of the Mandate. Other countries had closed their borders to immigration during the Depression and during the war. Despite these obstacles, many Jewish DPs were eager to leave Europe as soon as possible.

The Jewish Brigade Group, formed as a unit within the British army in late 1944, worked with former partisans to help organize the Beriha (literally, “escape”), the exodus of Jewish refugees across closed borders from inside Europe to the coast in an attempt to sail for Palestine. However, the British intercepted most of the ships. In 1947, for example, the British stopped the Exodus 1947 at the port of Haifa. The ship had 4,500 Holocaust survivors on board, who were forcibly returned on British vessels to Germany.

In the following years, the postwar Jewish refugee crisis eased. In 1948, the U.S. Congress passed the Displaced Persons Act, which provided up to 400,000 special visas for DPs uprooted by the Nazi or Soviet regimes. Some 63,000 of these visas were issued to Jews under the DP Act. When the DP Act expired in 1952, it was followed by a Refugee Relief Act that remained in force until the end of 1956. Moreover, in May 1948, the State of
Israel became an independent nation after the United Nations voted to partition Palestine into a Jewish state and an Arab state. Israel quickly moved to legalize the flow of Jewish immigrants into the new state, passing legislation providing for unlimited Jewish immigration to the Jewish homeland. The last DP camp closed in Germany in 1957.

**November 20, 1945**
The International Military Tribunal (IMT), made up of United States, British, French, and Soviet judges, began a trial of 21 major Nazi leaders at Nuremberg, Germany.

**December 22, 1945**
President Truman issued a directive giving DPs preference in receiving visas under the existing quota restrictions on immigration to the United States.

**July 4, 1946**
Mob attack against Jewish survivors in Kielce, Poland. Following a ritual murder accusation, a Polish mob killed more than 40 Jews and wounded dozens of others. This attack sparked a second mass migration of Jews from Poland and Eastern Europe to DP camps in Germany, Austria, and Italy.

**August 1, 1946**
The IMT passed judgment on the major Nazi war criminals on trial in Nuremberg, Germany. Eighteen were convicted, and three were acquitted. Eleven of the defendants were sentenced to death.

**October 16, 1946**
In accordance with the sentences handed down after the convictions, ten defendants were executed by hanging. One defendant, Hermann Göring, escaped the hangman by committing suicide in his cell.

**July 11, 1947**
The *Exodus 1947* ship carrying 4,500 Jewish refugees sailed for British-administered Palestine from southern France, despite British restrictions on Jewish immigration. The British intercepted the ship and forced it to proceed to Haifa in Palestine and then to the French port of Port-de-Bouc, where it lay at anchor from more than a month.

**September 8, 1947**
Ultimately, the British took the Jewish refugees from the *Exodus 1947* to Hamburg, Germany, and forcibly returned them to DP camps. The fate of the *Exodus 1947* dramatized the plight of Holocaust survivors in the DP camps and increased international pressure on Great Britain to allow free Jewish immigration to Palestine.

**November 29, 1947**
As the postwar Jewish refugee crisis escalated and relations between Jews and Arabs deteriorated, the British government decided to submit the status of Palestine to the United Nations. In a special session on this date, the United Nations General Assembly voted to partition Palestine into two new states, one Jewish and the other Arab. The decision was accepted by the Jewish and rejected by the Arab leadership.

**May 14, 1948**
David Ben-Gurion, leader of the Jews of Palestine, announced the establishment of the State of Israel in Tel Aviv and declared that Jewish immigration into the new state would be unrestricted. Between 1948 and 1951, almost 700,000 Jews immigrated to Israel, including more than two-thirds of the Jewish DPs in Europe.

**June 1948**
Congress passed the Displaced Persons Act, authorizing 200,000 DPs to enter the United States in 1949 and 1950. Though at first the law’s stipulations made it unfavorable to Jewish DPs, Congress amended the bill, and by 1952, thousands of Jewish DPs entered the United States. An estimated 80,000 Jewish DPs immigrated to the United States with the aid of American Jewish agencies between 1945 and 1952.