

HOLOCAUST. The term *Holocaust* is a designation for the catastrophic losses suffered by the Jews of Europe (and, to a far lesser extent, in North Africa) as a result of actions taken by the government of Germany or its allies between 1933 and 1945. The word came into common usage in the United States during the 1960s in the wake of the trial of Adolf Eichmann. It has since become current in most European languages (although in Russian, until recently, the term *katastrofa* was more common and remains widespread). Since the 1980s, the scope of the word as used in the United States has been expanded to encompass the losses suffered by any identifiable civilian group as a result of German government actions during the period in question, including Sinti and Roma (Gypsies), Poles, male homosexuals, Jehovah's

Witnesses, persons with mental retardation, and others. This wider usage, incorporated in the mission statement of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, has generally not caught on in other countries. Nor has it become common, as it has in the United States, to use the word more broadly as a synonym for *genocide*, or even as a designation for virtually any instance of catastrophic mass death. In Hebrew, the encounter between the Third Reich and the Jews was called *ha-sho'ah* (the catastrophe) even before German forces began systematic mass killings in 1941. In Yiddish, the encounter is usually called *khurbn* (destruction).

The ambiguity stemming from the different senses in which the term has been employed has led to much debate over whether the decimation of European Jewry in the twentieth century was fundamentally different from other cases of genocide or catastrophic group persecution. That debate seems somewhat misleading. All historical events are unique in the sense that they happened in a particular time and place and involved particular individuals. Nevertheless, it is difficult to imagine any historical event that



Warsaw Ghetto identity card of Zalman Friedrich. In July of 1942, disguised as a Polish railway worker, he smuggled himself into the Treblinka death camp and then reported to the ghetto what he saw. (YIVO Archives)

did not share at least some features with some other events. Whether the particular or the shared features of any event or set of events appear more significant--whether an event is most productively contemplated in its specific aspects or as an example of a broader generic phenomenon--depends primarily upon what the observer hopes to derive from contemplation. Because the purpose of this article is to sketch the process by which some 5.2

million Jews in Poland, the Baltic States, the Soviet Union, Romania, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia met their deaths at the hands of agents or allies of the Third Reich or of individuals acting under their inspiration, the specific aspects of the encounter between the Third Reich and the Jews of Eastern Europe--those comprehended by the terms *sho'ah* or *khurbn* or by the European usage of the term *Holocaust*--will be stressed at the expense of comparative analysis.

The Road to Killing. In popular parlance, the Holocaust is usually understood as a process coterminous with the existence of the Nazi regime in Germany; in other words, it is considered to have begun on 30 January 1933 and to have ended on 8 May 1945. In applying the term specifically to the Jews of Eastern Europe, however, this usage presents several major problems. First, East European Jewry was subjected to unmediated Nazi rule only for varying portions of the interval in question: the Jews of the Sudetenland from September 1938 to May 1945; of the remainder of the Czechoslovak provinces of Bohemia and Moravia (the so-called Protectorate) from March 1939 to May 1945; of the Memel (Klaipėda) region of Lithuania from March 1939 to autumn 1944; of Danzig (Gdańsk) and the western half of Poland (the Warthegau, Greater West and East Prussia, eastern Upper Silesia, and the Generalgouvernement) from September 1939 to January 1945; of the eastern half of Poland and the pre-1939 Soviet Ukrainian and Belorussian Republics from June 1941 to mid-1944; of the Baltic States (including the Wilno [Vilna] region) from June 1941 to summer 1944; of parts of the Russian Republic from mid-1941 to winter 1943-1944; of Hungary (including northern Transylvania, Subcarpathian Ruthenia, and the Feldvidék area) from March 1944 through the end of that year; and of Slovakia from October 1944 through April 1945. The Jews of Romania (including northern Bukovina, Bessarabia, and Transnistria) were for the most part not subject to direct German control because that country was not occupied by Germany but remained an independent ally of the Third Reich (until switching to the Allied side in August 1944). The same was true for the Jews of Hungary until March 1944, when the actual German military occupation began. Nominally it was also true for the Jews of Slovakia until the German suppression of the Slovak National Uprising in October 1944, but in reality the Slovak regime effectively handed control of Slovakian Jewry to Germany in March 1942.

The encounter between the Third Reich and East European Jewry was thus not uniform; it manifested itself differently at different times and in different places. In particular, the systematic, indiscriminate killing of entire Jewish populations that constitutes the defining feature of the Holocaust began and was carried out in each location at various points in the encounter and according to diverse scenarios. Whereas, for example, some 2 million Polish Jews were subjected to Nazi rule for more than two years before the start of mass killing, and the killing process continued at an uneven pace for

more than that range of time after it started (beginning with the murder of 30,000 Jews from Lublin in March 1942 and extending through the deportation of the last 70,000 Jews from the Łódź ghetto to Birkenau in August 1944), the murder of more than 430,000 Hungarian Jews outside of Budapest was organized within weeks of the beginning of German occupation and was essentially complete after only 56 days (between 15 May and 9 July 1944). As a result, it is difficult to speak of a single, invariable process by which the Jews of Eastern Europe were killed. Indeed, the Holocaust is perhaps better conceived as an aggregate of numerous local killing operations, each possessing its own distinct character, united only in their conformity to a grand vision of a Europe without Jews. For this reason, the particular processes by which Jews of the various countries and regions of Eastern Europe met their deaths under Nazi impact are described under the appropriate geographical entries.

A second difficulty in identifying the chronological boundaries of the Holocaust with those of the Third Reich lies in the fact that Nazi actions toward the Jews in the various East European regions prior to the actual onset of mass killing do not appear to have been undertaken with the goal of such slaughter clearly in mind. Although in retrospect it is possible to discern a sequence of events that moved seemingly inexorably from persecution to annihilation, the preponderance of recent research suggests that before late 1941, systematic murder of all European Jews was not what most Nazi strategists had in mind. Earlier programs appear to have envisioned the eventual physical removal of Jews from most of the areas of German domination and their concentration in a remote location. In 1939 and 1940, thinking centered upon the creation of a Jewish “reservation” in the Lublin region of the Generalgouvernement or in the French African colony of Madagascar.

In 1941, anticipating a quick conquest of the Soviet Union, German planners shifted their attention to Siberia, where they envisioned huge camps in which the young and strong, mostly men, would be put to work, while the old, infirm, or physically weak, including most women, would be left to die in the course of nature. Initially, the only Jews targeted for killing were to be Soviet Jewish men, especially state and Communist Party officials, intellectuals, and communal leaders. Jews from other territories within the Nazi orbit, as well as Soviet Jewish women and children and even men not thought to be particularly threatening, were to be concentrated in ghettos or placed under some other regime of strict control until the remote deportation site was ready to receive them. Such plans were abandoned only several months after the German invasion of the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941, when killing operations began to extend beyond the initial circle of targets.

Thus, even though the Jews of the Protectorate, of incorporated Poland, and of the Generalgouvernement were subjected to harsh (for many even lethal) treatment at Nazi hands for years prior to the onset of mass

killing, it is debatable whether those actions should be seen as an essential prelude to the mass killing operations that followed, notwithstanding the fact that these earlier treatments included racial classification; random acts of terror, physical abuse, and shooting; plunder of property; confiscation of assets; impressment for forced labor; identification by special markers; restrictions upon economic, educational, and cultural activity and freedom of movement; imposition of forced governing bodies (Judenräte); deportation; and (in Poland) confinement to ghettos under a regime of starvation and substandard hygiene. Even less is it certain that similar measures undertaken by the German-allied regimes in Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania before late 1941 (described in the entries for those countries) are best understood within the context of the Holocaust.

Such measures, on the one hand, undoubtedly weakened both individual Jews and the fabric of Jewish society, thus impeding Jews' ability, by themselves or as a group, to counteract or avoid the ongoing Nazi assault upon their physical well-being. Some scholars have called particular attention to changes in traditional gender roles brought about by early German actions (such as forced labor conscription) directed almost exclusively against men; women were often compelled to become their families' principal providers and protectors, tasks for which their earlier socialization had not prepared them and that imposed unfamiliar social and psychological burdens upon them. On the other hand, none of these developments *had necessarily* to culminate in the annihilation of subsequent years; had they wished, the Germans and their allies could have maintained a regime of brutality, repression, and exploitation without ever crossing the threshold to mass killing.

What *did* eventually precipitate the German-led annihilation campaign remains uncertain, largely because no explicit written order for such a campaign has been uncovered (and in all likelihood was ever issued). Some scholars believe that a decision was taken by the highest Nazi leadership in Berlin and passed down the chain of command by word of mouth. These scholars are divided over the catalyst for the decision. Some claim it was elation over Germany's initial swift victories in the Soviet campaign during the summer of 1941, which emboldened the Nazi leadership to realize what until then had been an ideological dream contemplated only for the distant future; others argue that it was rather frustration over the stalling of the Soviet campaign in the fall, which made leaders aware that the plans to remove Jews en masse to Siberia might not be realistic. A third opinion holds that it was the entry of the United States into the war in December 1941 that finally led the German leadership to commit itself irrevocably to a policy of mass killing throughout Europe; with the U.S. change in policy it appeared that the long-anticipated ultimate battle for world domination had begun.

Much recent research has suggested, however, that a mass killing

program actually emerged out of a series of local decisions taken by individual Nazi civilian and military officials in response to the immediate exigencies of the war situation in the areas for which they were responsible. In the Šiauliai (Shavli) district in Lithuania, for example, the first indiscriminate killings of all Jews (including women and children) were evidently ordered by the local Nazi commissar in September 1941 on his own initiative and justified as a way to alleviate a precarious food and supply situation in his territory. Officials in eastern Galicia appear to have instituted a policy of killing, without direction from above, in response to the fear that their bailiwicks would soon become a holding area for masses of Jews deported from points west and awaiting eventual resettlement to Siberia. Such local field administrators eventually sought approval for their actions up the chain of command. These findings suggest that it was the accumulation of several such requests in Berlin in the fall of 1941 that led to the implementation of a Reich-wide policy of systematic total murder by the end of that year.

Recent studies also strongly suggest that the idea of systematic total killing may well have recommended itself to its German initiators in part through their observation of the behavior of local non-Jews toward Jews in the Soviet, Polish, and Yugoslav territories occupied by Germany in 1941, as well as in Romania and the territories it reclaimed or conquered from the Soviet Union in the same year. All of these military actions were immediately followed by large-scale violence by Lithuanians, Estonians, Belorussians, Ukrainians, Romanians, Croats, and Poles against their Jewish neighbors in cities and small towns. Some of the violence was German-instigated or assisted, but much was spontaneous, representing a settling of old personal scores, a release of longstanding intercommunal tension, or covetousness of Jewish property. The pogroms in Zagreb (Croatia) on 22 June 1941 and in Iași (Romania) a week later, the shooting of 95 percent of Estonian Jewry by local paramilitary groups within two months of the German occupation, the burning of the entire Jewish population of the town of Jedwabne in Poland by a mob of their neighbors on 10 July 1941, and the massacre of 2,000 Jews in Lwów by Ukrainian militias in the so-called Aktion Petliura of 25-27 July 1941 are but a few examples of such violence, which in many communities at first claimed greater proportional Jewish losses than those inflicted by German forces at the same time.

But if the catastrophic loss of life sustained by East European Jewry beginning in 1941 resulted from violence perpetrated by local populations as well as by agents of the Third Reich, then the point at which the Holocaust can be said to have come to an end is almost as ambiguous as the point at which it began, for in many areas Jews continued for months to be subjected to lethal assaults even after the end of German occupation. In Poland, as many as 600 Jews, and perhaps more, died between 1945 and 1946 in attacks perpetrated in part by armed bands, some of whose propaganda spoke

explicitly of purging the country of its Jewish population. In Hungary, pogroms in Miskolc and Kunmadaras claimed Jewish lives in 1946. For this reason, some scholars extend the concept of the Holocaust chronologically beyond the collapse of the Third Reich, to a time (usually identified as from late 1946 to early 1947) when physical security for surviving East European Jews was restored.

Certainly, though, actions by Germans were responsible for the overwhelming share of Jewish deaths in the Holocaust. Whatever prompted the German decision to begin mass killing, it is clear that once that decision was taken, the German authorities pursued with single-minded determination the aim of ridding the East European areas under their control of all Jews. In the end they were highly successful. Some 2.5 million of the region's Jews were shot to death by military or police units or by the so-called Einsatzgruppen (Special Task Forces) of the SS. In addition, nearly 2 million Polish Jews were murdered in six killing centers erected on Polish soil--Chelmno, Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka, Majdanek, and Auschwitz-Birkenau. The camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau also served as the principal death site of approximately 600,000 Jews from other parts of Europe and North Africa. The murder in Eastern Europe was almost total: in Czechoslovakia, Poland, the Baltic States, and the occupied regions of the Soviet Union, Jews lost some 85-90 percent of their prewar number under Nazi impact, and about 70 percent of Hungarian Jewry perished after the German occupation in 1944. Even in independent Romania, German units assisted Romanian forces in killing about half of the country's Jewish population (mainly in Bessarabia and Bukovina). [See Einsatzgruppen; Killing Centers.]

Jewish Response. Was there anything the Jews of the region could have done that might have reduced their losses substantially? After the war, a high-ranking SS officer who had been active on the eastern front, Erich von dem Bach-Zelewsky, remarked that if Jews had been better organized, millions might have been saved. During the 1950s and 1960s, several prominent writers took up his charge, chiding Jews for their lack of preparation and resistance. By the 1980s, though, that position had been largely abandoned, as scholars came to understand the mammoth disparity in the resources that Germans and Jews had brought to bear to achieve their respective goals.

The most recent research has reinforced that rejection by emphasizing that throughout Eastern Europe, Jews had to contend with the murderous hostility not only of the Nazi occupiers but often of their non-Jewish neighbors as well. Indeed, in the early phases of the Holocaust per se--the period of actual mass killing--the latter threat appeared to many Jews to be the more acute. Often the Germans were able to take advantage of this perception by enlisting local collaborators to attack Jews, and then stepping in ostensibly to restore order, thus making the German administration seem a source of protection. The misplaced trust in the Germans engendered in

this fashion, often reinforced by favorable memories that some Jews had about the behavior of German occupation forces during World War I, vanished only gradually; no doubt it impeded the early development of Jewish resistance. So, too, did the fact that even after a policy of mass murder was adopted, the Germans went to great lengths to camouflage their intentions. Since Jews were never privy to the behind-the-scenes deliberations of German policymakers and had to infer German designs indirectly from what they were able actually to observe of German actions on the ground, Jews could never clearly comprehend the precise nature of the peril they faced. And since the Germans themselves did not adopt a clear policy of mass murder--a policy then unprecedented in human history--until late 1941, Jews could hardly have prepared themselves for such a policy in advance. Jewish communal and individual behavior during the period of mass killing reflected this fundamental uncertainty, lack of clear warning, and the effects of an absence of friends.

Nevertheless, once they became aware that entire Jewish communities had been destroyed--a realization that dawned gradually between late 1941 and mid-1942--the great majority of Jewish leaders in the countries under direct German control understood that their charges were in immediate mortal danger and put their minds to the task of formulating an appropriate response to the new situation. Their turn from the palliative and morale-building activities that characterized earlier phases of Nazi rule [*see Ghetto, article on Life in Ghetto*] toward avoidance, escape, and resistance strategies constitutes a principal theme of Jewish history in Eastern Europe during the years of destruction. To be sure, few leaders were persuaded that the annihilation of all of Jewry represented a fundamental Nazi ideological goal from which the German regime could not be deterred. In consequence, the most common organized Jewish response to the Nazi murder campaign after 1941 consisted of efforts to convince key German officials that it was in the interest of the Third Reich to keep at least some Jews alive. To this end, the heads of the Judenräte in some of the largest Jewish communities--notably Khayim Mordkhe Rumkowski (1877-1944) in Łódź, Jakub Gens (1905-1943) in Vilna, Efrayim Barash (1892-1943) in Białystok, and Mosheh Merin (1906-1943) in Upper Silesia--pursued a policy of "salvation through work." It was their hope that the Germans would come to view Jewish labor as a valuable economic resource and would accordingly provide sustenance and protection for Jewish workers who could contribute to the German war effort [*see Judenräte and Other Representative Bodies*]. Although these communities held out longer than others in which such a strategy was not attempted, in the end the Germans would not be bargained with on such purely rational, instrumental grounds. The notion that Jews could be of value to them as laborers was not consistent with Nazi anti-Jewish ideology, which represented Jews as incorrigible parasites.

Matters proved somewhat different in dealings aimed at ransoming

large numbers of Jews in return for monetary payment, such as those led by Gizi Fleischmann and Michael Dov Ber Weissmandel in Slovakia in 1942–1943 and by Rezső Kasztner in Hungary in 1944. Such ransom offers did not contradict Nazi stereotypes but actually built upon them, confirming in the minds of some German leaders that Jews commanded large sums of money, sources of income, and contacts outside the Nazi orbit. As it happened, Heinrich Himmler, the chief architect of the murder campaign, evinced interest in exploiting those supposed contacts in order to gain diplomatic advantage for the Reich in eventual negotiations with the Allies to end the war; he thus encouraged ransom talks to continue. Hence it appears that for a time in 1943–1944, Himmler might have been willing to sell large numbers of East European Jews, as it were, to a suitable buyer. From his perspective, though, the only suitable buyer was one or more of the Allied governments, not the Jews of Eastern Europe themselves. Once it became clear that the Allies were not interested in making a deal for Jewish lives, the possibility of rescue through ransom vanished. Still, the Jewish-Nazi contacts that developed during ransom negotiations in Hungary appear to have played a role in the survival of significant portions of the Jewish populations of Budapest, Debrecen, Szeged, and several smaller Hungarian Jewish communities. *[See the biographies of Fleischmann, Kasztner, and Weissmandel.]*

Jews also continuously sought ways to escape the Germans' grasp, whether by hiding, assuming false identities as non-Jews, or fleeing to places not under Nazi occupation. Various organizations endeavored to help Jews do so. In particular, the so-called Pracovná Skupina (Working Group) in Bratislava joined from 1942 with the Budapest-based Va'adat 'Ezrah va-Hatsalah (Aid and Rescue Committee) and a coalition of Zionist youth groups from the Zagłębie region in Poland to smuggle some 8,000 Jews from Slovakia, 4,000 from Germany, and 1,100 from Poland into Hungary, where until March 1944 Jews were relatively safe. Some 2,000 additional Jewish refugees from Nazi-occupied areas managed to make their way into Hungary on their own. Following the German occupation of Hungary, the Aid and Rescue Committee and Hungarian Zionist youth movements turned their attention to moving Jews out of Hungary into unoccupied Romania. About 7,000 Jews were rescued in this fashion.

Rescue through flight within Europe was an option available mainly to Jews residing in areas that bordered unoccupied territory. For the large majority living elsewhere, the only ways to evade the Nazi death sentence were to hide or to assume a disguise. These strategies were available only to individuals, not to large groups. In Poland, a joint Polish–Jewish underground organization called the Council for Aid to Jews, founded in December 1942 and known by the code name Żegota, endeavored to locate safe shelter and provide sustenance for Jews in hiding and to prepare false identity documents and secure employment for Jews seeking to pass as Poles.

The organization was able to assist approximately 4,000 Jews; the number who actually survived the war is not known. Perhaps as many as another 10,000 Polish Jews survived in hiding or under cover of false identity without organized assistance. Reliable figures for other East European countries have not yet been ascertained.

Armed resistance was an option available only in certain areas and to certain age groups. Beginning in 1942, Jewish armed resistance units were organized in more than one hundred ghettos in the Generalgouvernement, Lithuania, and the occupied Soviet territories. Some of these groups engaged German forces in battle while others conducted sabotage operations. Such units were never conceived, however, as a means to dissuade the Germans from continuing the murder campaign or to save large numbers of Jewish lives; the groups sought, rather, to choose what they regarded as an honorable form of death. Prisoners in several killing centers and labor camps staged revolts in the hope of escape, but only a few dozen survived, most joining partisan units in nearby forests. Perhaps as many as 30,000 Jews fought with partisan groups, mainly in the Baltic States and Soviet territories but also in the Generalgouvernement and Slovakia, but survival rates among the partisans were low. [*See Armed Resistance.*]

It can be estimated that the total number of Jews who survived the Holocaust in Eastern Europe due to the organized efforts of other Jews in the region to reduce the dimensions of the German murder campaign amounted to not much more than 5 or 6 percent of the East European Jewish population under Nazi rule. It is questionable whether those efforts could have saved more, or whether other potentially effective rescue or avoidance strategies were available. It has been argued that the extent of the Holocaust in Eastern Europe was magnified by compliant behavior on the part of the Judenräte. However, more often than not the killing actions were carried out directly by the perpetrators, without Jewish organizational or operational assistance. In this regard, the case of Minsk is instructive: there, the two heads of the Judenrat, Ilya Mushkin and Mosheh Yaffe, regularly subverted and even defied German orders while actively assisting the armed underground in the ghetto. Nevertheless, this ghetto of more than 80,000--the fourth largest in Europe--was liquidated in a series of shooting actions and deportations. In the end, noncompliance by the local Jewish leadership did not notably increase the survival rate. Nor did craven or collaborative behavior by Jews, in the form of roundups by Jewish police units and denunciations by Gestapo informers, increase the number of Jews killed to a statistically significant extent.

Most Jews within the German orbit appear to have believed that the best prospects for salvation from the Nazi threat were to be found not within their own communities but abroad. To this end, Jews in Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania attempted to establish contacts with Jewish organizations in Great Britain, the United States, and Palestine in the hope

that these groups might persuade the governments of the Western Allies to undertake rescue operations or negotiations on their behalf. Leaders of Jewish political parties in Poland, including the Bund and various labor Zionist groups, were especially active in transmitting information to the West about the systematic slaughter of European Jewry. In late 1942, these parties worked with a Polish underground courier, Jan Karski (1914-2001), to bring eyewitness testimony about the Nazi murder campaign to the heads of the British and American government and to shapers of public opinion in both countries. In May 1943, a Jewish representative on the Polish National Council in London, Shmuel Mordkhe Zygielbojm (1895–1943), committed suicide in order to prod Western action. However, such efforts brought no tangible results.

In assessing the place of the Holocaust in the history of East European Jewry, it can be noted that the catastrophe greatly accelerated two processes that had been proceeding slowly since the end of the nineteenth century--the removal of the population center of the Jewish world from east central Europe and the waning of the autonomous East European Jewish culture symbolized largely by the Yiddish language. To be sure, more than 2 million Jews remained in the Soviet Union (including the former Baltic States), and sizable communities were reestablished in Romania (430,000), Hungary (260,000), and Poland (210,000, decreasing to 90,000 following the mass exodus of 1946). In the Soviet Union and Poland, and to a lesser extent in Romania, efforts to promote a Jewish cultural revival in Yiddish were undertaken for a short time following liberation. However, the imposition of Communist rule throughout Eastern Europe, combined with mounting cold-war tensions, effectively destroyed the autonomy of those efforts and isolated the remaining Jews of Eastern Europe from the rest of world Jewry. Jews born after the war no longer lived in a Yiddish-speaking environment, and few opportunities were available for them to experience the culture that had been an inextricable part of their parents' prewar experience.

Some of the remnants of East European Jewry nevertheless played one final central role as such in the history of the Jews as a whole, although they did so ironically by leaving the region and becoming refugees. Those who participated in the Berihah movement, which concentrated more than 200,000 East European Jewish Holocaust survivors in displaced-persons camps in the Allied occupation zones of Germany and Austria, and who eventually boarded the illegal immigration ships that sought to bring them to Palestine despite the ban imposed by the British mandatory authorities on new Jewish settlement, were instrumental in focusing the attention of world public opinion upon the dimensions of the Holocaust, the plight of the survivors, and the contribution that a Jewish state in Palestine stood to make to alleviate many of the dislocations the Holocaust had generated. [See Berihah.]

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