The Holocaust

What is the Holocaust?

Under the cover of the Second World War, the Nazis sought to destroy all the Jews of Europe. For the first time in history, industrial methods were used for the mass extermination of a whole people. Six million people were murdered, including 1,500,000 children. This event is called the Holocaust. The Holocaust stands out as unique among the Nazi murder of civilians, not just because the Jews were the largest single victim group but for many other reasons as well. Jew-hatred was found in all Western societies and was central to Nazi ideology. In the hands of the Nazis it led not just to killing on a large scale, but to a campaign of factory-like mass extermination pursued with fanatical energy and single-mindedness. No other group was targeted for total annihilation in this way.

A general view of Flossenbürg Concentration Camp showing the barrack blocks and electrified fencing. (Photograph taken after its liberation in 1945 by troops of the US 3rd Army).

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The Nazis Take Power and The Persecution of Jews Begins

In 1933 Hitler took control of Germany and the Nazi reign of terror began. Antisemitism - hatred of the Jews - was central to the world-view of Hitler and the Nazis. They believed that the world was locked in a great struggle between two races, the 'Aryans' and the 'Semites'.

The Nazis founded their state on the idea that there was a 'Master Race', superior to all others. The 'Master Race' was made up of the Germans and their neighbours in northern Europe, especially the blond and blue-eyed 'Nordics'. The dark-haired peoples of southern Europe were considered inferior, though still 'Aryans'. Below them were people regarded as 'subhumans': the Slavs to the east, Gypsies, and non-whites. Below them were people regarded as 'subhumans': the Slavs to the east, Gypsies, and non-whites. At the very bottom of this hierarchy were Jews, whom the Nazis believed to be — inferior, yet powerful, the eternal enemy of the 'Aryan race'.

Hitler became Chancellor of Germany – head of government - in January 1933. In February, the first concentration camps were set up. The prisoners were usually political opponents of the régime. Though conditions were still relatively mild compared with what was to come, some prisoners did not survive the meagre rations, hard labour, beatings and torture. From summer 1934, the camps were run by the SS (Schutzstaffel), which had grown from being Hitler’s personal squad of bodyguards to Hitler’s main instrument of terror. In the years before the war, the prisoner population of the camps came to include Jews, Roma and Sinti (Gypsies) and homosexuals, as well as Jehovah's Witnesses who refused to compromise their religious beliefs.

The first directly anti-Jewish measure took place on 1 April 1933 with a one-day boycott of Jewish-owned shops and businesses. In May books by authors whom the Nazis disliked – including many by Jewish authors - were ceremonially burned. The Nazis censored and then seized control of all the media. Radio, films, rallies, exhibitions and posters spread Nazi doctrines, especially antisemitism and racism. Children's books and school lessons were designed to incite the young to hate Jews. Throughout Germany signs were put up forbidding Jews to enter inns, restaurants, parks and even entire villages. Jews, and 'Aryans' who associated with them, were often humiliated in public. In all, the Nazi regime would impose some 2,000 laws against Jews. Jews - and people of Jewish descent - were barred from public service and most professions. They were denied state social security and the needy had to rely on hard-pressed Jewish charities.

When the Nuremberg Laws were introduced, in September 1935, the Jews became total outcasts. They lost their German citizenship, and were forbidden to marry non-Jews. Penalties for breaking the laws were severe. The laws defined Jews by
ancestry instead of religion: anyone with at least three Jewish grandparents was considered a Jew; even one Jewish grandparent was sometimes enough.

From 1936 Hitler expanded German territories into the Rhineland, Austria, Czechoslovakia and thousands more Jews were subjected to Nazi persecution.

Emigration

As Nazi persecution intensified Jews became increasingly desperate to leave Germany. But emigrating was a major step, and very difficult. Just recovering from the century's worst economic recession, countries in Europe and elsewhere were reluctant to take in refugees and placed strict limits on their numbers. To make things worse, the Nazis restricted the amount of money and possessions Jews could take with them. By 1939 about half of Germany's 500,000 Jews had left the country, along with 125,000 from Austria and 20,000 from the newly-acquired Czech lands.

The ‘November Pogrom’ – Kristallnacht

On 9 November 1938, the Nazis staged 'spontaneous' violence against the Jews throughout Greater Germany. More than 7,500 Jewish shops were wrecked, leaving the streets littered with glass. This gave this pogrom the name by which it is usually known, Kristallnacht - the Night of Broken Glass. Jewish-owned shops were looted and nearly half the synagogues in Germany were burned down. Countless religious objects were desecrated or destroyed. While police stood by, Nazi stormtroopers broke into Jewish homes, terrorising men, women and children. Ninety-one Jews were murdered and over 20,000 men were arrested and taken to concentration camps. Afterwards the Jewish community was fined one billion Reichsmarks to pay for the damage.
The Invasion of Poland and Nazi Policy towards Polish Jews

On 1 September 1939, Hitler invaded Poland. Two days later, Britain and France declared war on Germany. The Second World War had begun.

The Germans advanced rapidly across Poland. Then the Soviet Union attacked Poland from the east, under a secret agreement with Germany. Victory came within weeks, and Poland disappeared from the map of Europe. The Nazis now controlled much of the territory they had wanted as ‘living space’ (Lebensraum), as well as Europe’s largest Jewish community.

The two million Polish Jews who had now come under Nazi control were singled out for special measures. They were stripped of their property, their freedom of movement was limited, and men had to register for forced labour. Communities were ordered to create Jewish Councils to transmit German orders to the people. In the General Government, the main part of occupied Poland, all Jews over the age of twelve had to wear a white armband with a blue star of David; in the annexed territories, they had to sew yellow stars onto their clothing. Jews were subject to random violence and many were forced to work in labour camps under appalling conditions. Some 100,000 died during 1939-1940. Much worse was to come.
The Murder Becomes Systematic

On 22 June 1941, Germany suddenly broke its treaty with the Soviet Union and invaded in overwhelming force. With this escalation of war, Nazi fanaticism reached new levels and terror turned into systematic mass murder. The invasion was Hitler’s crusade against ‘Jewish Bolshevism’. Acting on the orders of Security Police Chief Reinhard Heydrich, four SS Einsatzgruppen (‘Action Groups’) – in effect mobile killing squads - moved through captured territory from village to village rounding up and massacring civilians, including women and children. They shot mainly Jews, but also Communists and others on racial and ideological grounds. They were helped by local collaborators and German police and army personnel, totalling 30,000 people. The victims were buried in mass graves. Sources vary as to the number of Jews killed by the Einsatzgruppen – who were helped by local auxiliaries as well as German soldiers and police – but estimates run from 500,000 to 1 million.

Ghettos

After the Nazis occupied Poland, Jews had gradually been forced into ghettos. The Nazis wanted to keep the country’s huge Jewish population under close control and exploit its labour. In larger cities and towns, ghettos were shut in by walls, fences, or barbed wire. No one could leave or enter without a special pass. By mid-1941, nearly all the Jews of occupied Poland had been forced into these overcrowded slums. Ghettos were also set up in the newly-conquered areas of the Soviet Union. The Nazis forced Jewish leaders to form councils to run the ghettos and to carry out their orders.

Ghettos were overcrowded and conditions became increasingly desperate. The Warsaw Ghetto held 30% of the city’s population in just 2.4% of its space. Diseases such as typhus and tuberculosis became widespread. Conditions worsened when Jews from small towns and those deported from other countries were squeezed in. Jews received little food and many starved. Some 500,000 Jews died in ghettos from starvation, disease or Nazi acts of brutality.
The ‘Final Solution’

The Nazis mobilised the entire apparatus of a modern state to carry out what they called ‘the Final Solution of the Jewish Question in Europe’ - the total extermination of the European Jews. The Final Solution involved an enormous array of organisations, not only the Nazi administration and police forces but also the army and private industry.

Private companies supplied crematory ovens, gas vans and poison gas. The army lent the killing squads equipment and personnel, and carried out its own killings. Various branches of the state administration organised deportation trains, decided on timetables and priorities, processed the victims' possessions, and cajoled foreign governments into rounding up Jews to be killed.

There is debate among historians as to when Hitler gave the order for this ‘Final Solution’. Some historians think that Hitler ordered the Final Solution in the spring of 1941 as part of the preparations for the war against the Soviet Union and ‘Jewish bolshevism’. Others think the order was given after the US entered the war in December 1941: Hitler had threatened that if it came to a world war, the Jews would be annihilated, and in his view the US entry into the war had turned it into a global conflict. Still others believe that no order was given or needed, since Hitler’s followers could work out the logic of his ideas for themselves. What we do know is that any decision to murder all of Europe’s Jews had been taken by the time of the Wannsee Conference, which was held in Berlin in January 1942. It was here that the logistics and administrative details of the murder of European Jews were worked out by fifteen senior SS and Nazi party officials and civil servants.

‘Resettlement’

In March 1942, the Nazis began to move people out of the ghettos for ‘resettlement in the East’ – supposedly to work. Few people believed this story, since the old, the poor, the sick and children were taken first.

Rumours soon spread that those taken for ‘resettlement' were being killed. People tried to save themselves by hiding during round-ups, escaping, or getting work producing goods for the German war effort. Young political activists began to make plans for armed resistance. Most people were too hungry, ill or demoralised to be able to resist.

The Jewish councils and ghetto police were forced to help round up their fellow Jews or be ‘resettled' themselves, with their families. Jewish leaders faced a huge dilemma. Should they protest, encourage a desperate stand against the Nazis, or co-operate in the hope that at least some people could be saved?
New Ways of Killing

To improve on mass shooting as a killing method, the SS turned to the ‘Euthanasia’ programme, in place since the start of the war, which had by this stage killed some 70,000 - 80,000 people with mentally and physically disabilities using carbon monoxide gas. The latest technique, gradually adopted from November 1941, was the gas van. Victims were ordered into these vans, the doors were locked and the exhaust fumes pumped into the back and gassed. But it soon became clear that if millions were to be murdered, purpose-built installations would be needed.

Death Factories

The death camp proved to be the Nazis’ most sinister invention. The first of these opened in December 1941 at Chelmno. Three more death camps opened in the spring of 1942 near the villages of Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka in Nazi-occupied Poland. Their main purpose was to exterminate the Polish Jews.

They drew men and equipment from the ‘Euthanasia’ programme, and were equipped with gas chambers capable of killing thousands of people at a time. This project, code-named ‘Aktion Reinhardt’, was stopped in the Autumn of 1943 and all traces of the camps were destroyed. 1,600,000 Jews and thousands of Gypsies had been murdered.

The only precedent for such industrial killing was the Nazis’ own ‘Euthanasia’ programme, aimed at people with mental and physical disabilities. Many of the techniques used in the ‘Euthanasia’ programme, such as gas vans, gas chambers disguised as shower installations and the use of carbon monoxide gas, were adapted and scaled up for the mass killing of Jews. Personnel to operate the death camps were also recruited from the ‘Euthanasia’ programme.

Marked Out

In most countries they controlled, the Nazis ordered Jews to sew a yellow star onto their clothing. Anyone caught without one could be imprisoned or shot. The yellow star was first introduced in the annexed areas of Poland in 1939, and in other countries, including Germany, from 1941. It harked back to the marking of Jews in the Middle Ages.

The star was intended to humiliate the Jews and mark them out for segregation and discrimination. Later it made them easy to round up and deport to the camps.
Deportation

Right across Nazi-occupied Europe Jews were rounded up and packed into ghettos or transit (holding) camps, usually near railway lines. Victims to be ‘resettled’ were then crammed into cattle wagons, up to one hundred people in each. The journeys lasted days, in freezing cold or stifling heat, often without food, water, or toilet facilities. Many of the deportees died before reaching their final destination.

The measures needed to prepare for the deportations varied from country to country. Some governments were friendly to the Nazis. They introduced anti-Jewish measures on their own initiative, or acted under varying degrees of pressure from the Nazis. In other areas, the Nazis were in direct control but usually relied on the help of local collaborators. In most occupied countries, Jews were forced out of their jobs, their property and their rights were taken away. They were then forced into ghettos or transit camps to await deportation. Only a few managed to escape or delay their fate by living under assumed names or going into hiding.

Aushwitz

Railway routes led from ghettos and transit camps all over Europe to the death camps. The death camps at Chelmno, Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka had been set up mainly to kill Polish Jews. But the largest death camp, and the last to go into full-scale operation, was Auschwitz II-Birkenau. As the deportation trains arrived at Birkenau, Jewish victims were ‘selected’ by an SS doctor. About one in five was kept for slave labour; the rest were killed by gas immediately. More than a million Jews from all over Europe were killed in its gas chambers. It was where the Nazis perfected their killing technology.

The Concentration Camp System

Jews were also worked to death in a system of concentration camps spread throughout Nazi-occupied Europe. This network grew from just a handful of camps in prewar Germany into thousands of different camps and sub-camps. Among the most notorious were Dachau, Buchenwald and Mauthausen. More than two million men, women and children of all nationalities, races, faiths and ideologies deemed enemies by the Nazis were used as slave labour in the camps. German firms could buy their labour from the SS. Prisoners were subjected to hard labour, starvation, and harsh punishments. Nearly half were murdered, or died as a result of the appalling conditions.
The Death Marches and Overrunning of the Camps

Early in 1945, with Russian forces advancing westwards through Poland, the Nazis began to transport or force-march surviving prisoners of the camps deep into Germany. Most were force-marched hundreds of miles. Starving and weak, poorly clothed and with no proper shoes, they walked for weeks through snow and rain, sleeping in barns or in the open. Tens of thousands died from cold or hunger, or were shot for not keeping up. Survivors were moved on again as the Allied advance continued. Their final destinations were to be the concentration camps at Bergen-Belsen, Buchenwald, Mauthausen, Terezin and Ravensbrück, or one of their many sub-camps. The resulting overcrowding in these camps would cause many more deaths.

In the closing months of the war in Europe, forward units of the Allied armies advancing from both east and west came across the concentration camps. Horrified at what they saw, the liberators forced German soldiers and civilians to view the camps, and sometimes to help bury the dead. Newspapers, radio broadcasts and newsreels spread the news throughout Europe and America.

Relief efforts could not stop more victims from dying of malnutrition or in the epidemics which swept the camps. The rehabilitation and repatriation of survivors continued long after the war in Europe ended on 8 May 1945.
Additional Information

Jewish Resistance

People often ask why Jews did not resist. By this they often mean armed resistance. But resistance takes many forms. Even something like holding a religious service or hiding a sacred artefact – which so many did, despite the risks they ran – was an act of resistance.

It is also true, however, that the Nazis cloaked their true intentions. People clung to the hope that they were indeed being resettled for labour, rather than being sent to their deaths. As regards fighting the Nazis, few Jews had any military training and even those who did had little access to weapons.

Even so, many Jews did indeed take up arms. The following are examples:

The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising

During the main deportations from the Warsaw ghetto in the summer of 1942, Jewish youth groups organised a resistance movement. Shots were fired at police on 18 January 1943, during a second, three-day Aktion. Then when the Nazis resumed clearing the ghetto on 19 April they were met by organised groups of fighters from the Jewish Combat Organisation, led by 23-year-old Mordechai Anielewicz, and the Jewish Military Union. The rest of the ghetto’s inhabitants disappeared into a maze of underground bunkers.
To force people out, the Nazis burned down the ghetto, building by building. But fighting groups held out in bunkers for a month, and sporadic resistance continued still longer. Jürgen Stroop, the German commander, reported that 7,000 Jews were killed in the fighting. The 50,000 Jews who survived the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising were deported to labour camps. They were shot on 3 November 1943 in what the Nazis cynically called the ‘Harvest Festival’.

Jewish armed revolts took place at three death camps: Treblinka II, Sobibor, Auschwitz, and in more than 40 different ghettos, mostly in eastern Poland. Elsewhere, especially Belarus and Lithuania, Jews escaping from the ghettos took up arms as partisans, either independently or with Soviet or other partisan groups. In all, 30,000 Jewish partisans fought the Nazis in Eastern Europe. Armed Jewish groups also resisted elsewhere. The main French group called itself l’Organisation Juive de Combat, in honour of the Warsaw fighters.

Some Jews who escaped the Nazi net, especially in forested or mountainous regions, became partisans — resistance fighters. They set up encampments in the forests, some of which sheltered Jewish fugitives in ‘family camps’. Partisans lived in constant fear of attack, sometimes by antisemitic rivals. In winter, food and weapons were hard to find, and many froze to death. If caught, partisans and those who helped them were tortured and killed.

Many Jews also fought with non-Jewish partisan groups or joined the Soviet Red Army.

**Hiding**

It is estimated that about 200,000 Jews survived in hiding, or by pretending to be ‘Aryans’ with the help of false identity documents.

Jews living ‘on the surface’ as ‘Aryans’ needed help to escape from ghettos or camps, find shelter, and obtain documents. Jews hiding ‘under the surface’ needed helpers to provide shelter, food, and clothing, often at the risk of their lives. Such help usually had to be paid for, sometimes at exorbitant prices, but many thousands of people helped Jews without asking for any money in return.

Both the Jews and their protectors feared betrayal by ordinary people, and were hunted by blackmailers and the police. Penalties for helping Jews were severe: more than 1,000 people lost their lives, and many more were sent to concentration camps. One third of the Jews in hiding died.
How much did the British authorities know about the Holocaust and what could and did they do?

After France fell in June 1940, Britain was the only power still at war with Germany. Several occupied countries established Governments-in-Exile in London, maintaining contact with their homelands by couriers and radio. Britain also monitored German radio transmissions, and managed to break important German codes. Through these channels, Britain was reasonably well informed of events in occupied Europe.

As events unfolded, the British government would be pressed to condemn Nazi crimes, to try to stop or hinder them by military and diplomatic means, and to help the thousands of refugees who managed to escape from Nazi-occupied countries. Since British Signals Intelligence could decode radio messages from some of the mobile killing units, the government immediately knew about large-scale massacres in the East. But this information had to be kept secret, or the Germans would have known that their codes had been broken and the whole war effort might have been compromised.

Reports transmitted by the Polish Government-in-Exile and through neutral Switzerland gradually made the picture clear over the summer of 1942. On 17 December, the Allies issued a declaration that condemned the Nazi extermination policy and threatened the perpetrators with punishment after the war, but no other action was taken. On 19 April 1943, the day that the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising broke out, British and American officials met in Bermuda to discuss what should be done about refugees. Little was decided.

The news that reached the outside world led to protests and calls for action. Allied governments generally responded that the best way to save lives was to win the war as soon as possible. But for many Jews facing annihilation, the end of the war would come too late.

The Holocaust remains the subject of intense historical debate, could the Christian churches have done more? Could more relief not have been sent? Could lives have been bought? One subject which is still the source of much debate is whether or not the Allies could have saved lives by bombing Auschwitz. The main arguments are set out below in Case study 1. Case study 2 looks at a further contentious issue, namely whether or not the Allies could have saved Jewish lives by taking in refugees.
Case Study 1: Could the bombing of Auschwitz have saved lives?

Details about the killing operations at Auschwitz reached Britain in the spring of 1944, prompting calls for the gas chambers or the railway tracks leading to the camp to be bombed, or for weapons to be dropped to the prisoners. Soviet bombers had raided Warsaw in the spring of 1943, and could easily have reached Auschwitz a year later, when Soviet troops were already fighting on Polish soil. But the Soviet government was never approached with the idea of mounting such a raid.

The Western Allies could reach the camp from December 1943 when the Italian air bases at Foggia and Brindisi fell into their hands. The proposal to bomb Auschwitz was approved by Churchill and Foreign Secretary Eden on 7 July. But officials within the Foreign Office and the Air Ministry ruled that it was not practical.

Pros and Cons of bombing Auschwitz

More than 100,000 Jews were killed in the gas chambers of Auschwitz II - Birkenau after the bombing proposal was rejected. Could bombing the gas chambers have saved their lives? The Buna artificial rubber plant at Auschwitz III (Monowitz), only a few miles from the killing site, was bombed in August 1944, showing that an air raid was possible. But a successful raid would have had to destroy all four crematoria, and even then other killing techniques could have been improvised. For example the ‘bunkers’ used for gassing in 1942 could have been brought back into use.

Bombing was inaccurate (fewer than half of all bombs dropped in 1944 came within 1,000 feet of their targets), and bombs falling on the barracks blocks could have killed thousands of prisoners who were not destined for the gas chambers. Precision raids would have required the use of Mosquito fighter-bombers at the extreme of their range, flying by bright moonlight over hundreds of miles of enemy territory.

Practical Reasons and Moral Reasons

Many former prisoners of Auschwitz say they would have welcomed bombing as a sign of moral support, even if some had been killed. The Allies did carry out raids against prisons and camps in Western Europe; for example a Mosquito raid on the Gestapo headquarters in Copenhagen, 500 miles from base as compared with 600 for Auschwitz, allowed several hundred members of the underground resistance to escape. Weapons were also air-dropped to support the Warsaw Uprising in September 1944. The idea of dropping weapons to the prisoners at Auschwitz was proposed but apparently never seriously considered.
Bombing the Auschwitz Railway Tracks

Historians generally agree that bombing the railway tracks leading to the camp would not have had much effect. The town of Auschwitz (Oswiecim) was a railway hub with several different lines leading to it. Trains could therefore have been rerouted, or else the victims could have been force-marched to their destinations or massacred on the spot. Railway lines are a small target and hard to hit, and they are so easily repaired that even after a successful raid rail traffic would have been interrupted for a few days at most.

Case Study 2: Could Britain and the Allies have taken in refugees?

Introduction

Most countries had restrictive immigration policies before the war and refugees were usually treated as if they were economic migrants, not asylum-seekers. Among the main destinations for Jewish refugees were the US and Palestine, but US immigration quotas between 1933 and 1945 were set at their lowest levels ever, while Britain’s 1939 White Paper on Palestine restricted Jewish immigration to that country to 75,000 over five years.

About half of Germany’s 500,000 Jews managed to leave the country despite these restrictions, but once the war started Britain stopped taking in refugees altogether. This is normal in wartime, since countries at war cannot devote resources to dealing with newcomers and are afraid of admitting enemy agents; but this policy was not reviewed, despite mounting evidence of mass murder. Many refugees already in Britain were temporarily interned as enemy aliens.

Although escape from Hitler’s Europe was difficult during the war, tens of thousands of refugees did manage to reach neutral countries, or countries allied with Germany such as Romania and Bulgaria from which they hoped to travel further. 12,000 Jews bought passage on ships, often overcrowded and unsafe, and tried to reach Palestine or other safe havens.

German Jews could emigrate legally until October 1941, but few countries were willing to take them in. Even as late as the autumn of 1942, when the Final Solution was in full swing, the Nazis initiated the Heimschaffungsaktion (repatriation action), designed to get neutral states to take back their Jewish citizens. Jews to be repatriated were imprisoned in transit camps at Vittel, Tittmoning and Bergen-Belsen, from which many were eventually sent to death camps.
The Plight of the Refugees

Wartime refugees rarely met with a friendly reception. Instead of treating them as people whose lives were in danger, most countries applied normal immigration and visa rules. Jews, who were often stateless, were treated with particular suspicion. Some were turned back, others were interned in camps. Both Britain and the US were urged to take in refugees, and Britain came under pressure to let them go to Palestine. But the number actually admitted fell short even of the severely restricted immigration quotas.

The British Government Under Pressure

The Allied Declaration of 17 December 1942 acknowledged that the Nazis were engaged in a systematic campaign of extermination against the Jews, and promised to bring the perpetrators to justice. But months passed with no action taken. After intense public pressure, including a statement by the Archbishops of Canterbury, York and Wales, an Anglo-American conference was organised to deal with the question of refugees from Nazi Europe. This conference opened in Bermuda on 19 April 1943.

The April 1943 Bermuda Conference

In April 1943 an Anglo-American Conference took place in Bermuda. It was convened to decide what should be done about the plight of Jews. The US and British delegations consisted of low-level officials and had no power to make major policy decisions. Jewish organisations (which were not represented at the conference) had pleaded for asylum to be offered to all Jews under German control, but they rejected this plea on the grounds that it would raise ‘insuperable difficulties’.

The conference decided on only one concrete action. Under Nazi pressure to keep Jews out, neutral Spain had closed its border with France. But that was a vital escape route for downed Allied airmen. To placate the Spanish government it was agreed to set up a camp in North Africa to which the 6,000 Jewish refugees in Spain would be transferred. Two camps were built in 1944, at Fedhala and Philippeville in Morocco, but in the end only 630 refugees were sent there.

The British delegation reported afterwards that ‘The present combination, in so many countries, of pity for Jews under German control and extreme reluctance to let further Jews into their borders persists’. But neither Britain nor the US was an exception.
The Struma and Other Refugee Ships

On 12 December 1941, the Struma, a small, leaky ship left Constanza, Romania, loaded with 769 Jewish refugees hoping to reach Palestine. Its engines failed off the Turkish coast. Engineers spent nine weeks trying to repair them; in the meantime passengers were not allowed to disembark or receive supplies. Britain urged the Turkish government to turn the ship back, fearing a flood of Jewish refugees. Finally the Turks towed the still-disabled Struma back out to sea, where it sank. There was one survivor.

The Struma was one of many ships carrying Jewish refugees that tried to take refugees to Palestine during the war. In all, nearly 12,000 refugees sought safety in this way. About 1,000 died. Most of the others were interned, several hundred in Mauritius and the rest in Palestine.

In Defence of the Allies

Defenders of the Anglo-American record maintain that there were few Jewish refugees whom the Allies might realistically have been able to help. They point out that it was hard for Jews to leave Nazi-controlled territory, and that those who did reach neutral countries such as Spain were already safe and did not need to be rescued. (But Jews in Romania, such as those who boarded the Struma, were at the mercy of a government known to be viciously antisemitic. The British recommendation that they be turned back is therefore very difficult to justify. Officials were in general not eager to encourage Jews to flee.)

Other points are often made. Jews reaching Allied territory were usually interned, but were at least not turned away. Negotiating with the Nazis for the release of Jews was not a realistic option, since the Nazis could hardly be trusted. That immigration quotas went unfilled shows, not that the Allies were reluctant to let Jews in, but rather that it was difficult for Jews to get out. Churchill and Roosevelt were sympathetic to the Jews, though the same was not always true of officials or military leaders.
Case Study 3: What did the Christian Churches do? What could they have done?

Introduction

The Christian churches did not respond uniformly to the persecution of the Jews. A few church leaders spoke out publicly against the Nazis, but most did not. Many clergymen, nuns and monks risked their lives to help the persecuted, but most did not. A few churchmen even sided with the perpetrators. Defenders of the Christian record emphasise the help that was given and point to the difficulties and dangers of giving it. Critics point to the Christian record of antisemitism and the fact that many conservative church leaders were sympathetic to movements of the extreme right.

Anti-Jewish ideas had been part of Christianity since its earliest days, and many Christian clergymen continued to engage in antisemitic preaching and publishing, even during the Nazi era. Messages of this kind created and reinforced antisemitic prejudices among of millions of people, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe. Many less sophisticated people, including clergymen, convinced themselves that the Nazi programme was God’s will and that they should not interfere. Some convinced themselves that it was immoral to help Jews and moral to denounce them.

Yet Christians were generally against the Nazis’ racist ideas. They did not like the fact that members of their own congregations could be persecuted if they were of Jewish descent. The Nazis also were not friendly to Christianity, which Hitler called ‘the main bearer of the Jewish idea of morality in Europe’. But the Nazis knew that many of their supporters were Christians and were careful not to alienate them.

Conservative Christians in turn felt that Europe should be a Christian society and supported discrimination against the Jews. Christian victims of Nazi persecution included dissident German churchmen and the Polish clergy, who were viewed as part of the Polish leadership. Arrested clergymen were sent to Dachau concentration camp, where thousands died and thousands more were shot or hanged. Pope Pius XII did not protest publicly at their treatment.

Christians on the Side of the Victims and Perpetrators

Many Christian orphanages and religious establishments gave shelter to Jews, especially Jewish children. Catholic priests and Protestant pastors also provided Jews with forged documents such as false birth and baptismal records. In some cases, individual churchmen risked their lives by preaching sermons urging their parishioners to help Jews. In the French Protestant village of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, all 5,000 villagers co-operated in hiding 5,000 Jews, under the leadership of pastor André Trocmé; other villages nearby followed his example.
If some Christians helped Jews, others were indifferent or even sided with the perpetrators. For example the Lutheran pastor Ernst Biberstein was the commander of Einsatzkommando 6, which massacred thousands of Jews in Ukraine, and Catholic priests headed several of the notorious concentration camps operated by the Ustashe regime in Croatia. Father Tiso, the president of Slovakia, turned Jews over for deportation to the death camps. Clergymen were called on to administer tests of religious knowledge to people suspected of being Jews, and to provide proofs of ‘Aryanness’ through birth and baptismal records.

**The Catholic Church**

In 1933, Hitler signed a ‘Concordat’ with the Catholic church, under which the church promised not to interfere in politics and Hitler in turn promised to allow religious freedom. But when the Nazis began to campaign against teaching religion in the schools, and racial laws began to affect Catholics, Pope Pius XI issued the encyclical Mit Brennender Sorge (‘With burning concern’). It condemned Nazi racial teachings but not anti-Jewish laws.

**Pope Pius XII and the Holocaust**

Eugenio Pacelli became Pope Pius XII in 1939, on the eve of war. He was a deeply spiritual man, who believed that salvation comes through prayer and contemplation. He mistrusted all modern political movements, including liberalism, capitalism and socialism, and stayed politically neutral throughout the war. He especially feared communism, and associated it with the Jews. He was friendly towards right-wing Catholic governments such as those in Vichy France, Spain, Portugal, and the Nazi satellite states of Slovakia and Croatia.

In July 1941, the Vichy government in France asked their ambassador to the Vatican to find out the Pope’s opinion of their new anti-Jewish laws. The ambassador replied that ‘there is nothing in these measures that can give rise to criticism from the viewpoint of the Holy See’, except that the law was wrong in treating Catholics of Jewish descent as Jews. But he added that ‘it does not follow from this doctrinal divergence’ that the French state would face ‘censure or disapproval’.

Pius XII was well informed about events in occupied Europe through the church’s internal networks. He was repeatedly asked to condemn Nazi atrocities against the Jews, but he refused, on the grounds that a public statement might make the situation of the victims worse. In December 1942, the US ambassador to the Vatican asked Pius XII to sign the Allied declaration on war crimes which had just been adopted, but he refused that as well. A few days later he read his 1942 Christmas Eve broadcast. In this broadcast, Pius XII spoke of the ‘Rights of Man’. He condemned the ‘unbridled lust for profit and power’, and appealed for men to vow that they would return to the divine law. ‘Humanity owes this vow’, he added,
‘to those hundreds of thousands who, without any fault of their own, sometimes only by reason of their nationality or race, are marked down for death or gradual extinction.’ This was the only public statement that he made about Nazi atrocities during the war, mentioning neither the Nazis nor the Jews.

In Croatia, the Nazis established a ‘National Republic of Croatia’ under the leadership of Ante Pavelic and the extreme nationalist Ustashe movement. This murderous regime operated its own system of 22 concentration camps, including the notorious one at Jasenovac. All told some 500,000 Serbs and tens of thousands of Jews and Roma/Sinti were massacred in these camps and elsewhere. The Vatican was informed of these crimes by its local envoys, but maintained good relations with the regime throughout the war.

German troops occupied Rome in September 1943, after Italy had signed an armistice with the Allies. Soon after, the Nazis rounded up and deported the Jews of Rome. The local German military commander and the German ambassador to the Vatican both asked the Pope to protest against this action by the SS, which they feared would trigger popular unrest. But although he gave sanctuary in the Vatican to several hundred Jews, he once again refused to take a public stand.

**In Defence of Pope Pius XII**

The Pope’s defenders point out that when Dutch bishops protested against the deportations of Jews from their country in July 1942, the Nazis retaliated by cancelling the exemptions of Catholics of Jewish descent. A similar protest by French bishops a month later was simply ignored. Thus open protest did no good, and could make things worse. The Vatican, it is argued, needed to act behind the scenes, through quiet diplomacy and by helping those in need.

**Catholic Diplomacy During the Holocaust**

Papal nuncios — ambassadors — in a number of countries did tell local regimes what was happening to deported Jews, and put pressure on them to stop the deportations. This happened in Slovakia and Hungary, both Catholic countries, but also in Orthodox Christian Romania and Bulgaria. In each case the deportations were stopped, but other factors were at work and it is debatable how much was due to the influence of the nuncios. Cesare Orsenigo, the nuncio to Nazi Germany, remained passive. When Nazi dissident Kurt Gerstein sought to inform him about details of the death camps in 1942, Orsenigo refused to see him.
The Protestant Churches

Like that of the Catholic church, the record of the Protestant churches was mixed. The Dutch Reformed Church joined the Catholic church in protesting against the deportation of Jews, but the Dutch Calvinists did not. In France, Pastor Marc Boegner, head of the National Protestant Federation and a member of the Vichy National Council, tried to use his influence to have anti-Jewish laws repealed and to have deportations stopped.

The German Lutheran Church

The German Lutheran church was quiescent and many churchmen even supported the Nazis. After taking power in 1933, Hitler embarked on a programme of ‘coordination’ (Gleichschaltung) designed to subordinate all German institutions to the Nazi state. Hitler forced the Lutheran church to adopt a Nazi-style constitution and to accept his candidate, Ludwig Müller, as First Reich Bishop. Pastor Martin Niemöller, a traditional antisemite who had joined the Nazi party, split with the regime in 1934 over its attempt to control religious life and formed the Confessing Church. 7,000 of the 17,000 German Lutheran pastors joined him, but the Confessing Church was soon broken up by the Nazis.

Martin Niemöller, founder of the Confessing Church was arrested in 1937 after an anti-Nazi sermon. He spent the next eight years in prisons and concentration camps, but survived the war. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor, supported the Confessing Church. In 1938 he became a double agent in the German Military Intelligence Service, the Abwehr, which was a centre of German resistance to Hitler. He helped seven Jews to escape to Switzerland and travelled abroad to ask the Allies to support the German underground. He was arrested in April 1943 and died in Flossenbürg concentration camp in April 1945.

Debate on all of these issues continues.

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