

VOCABULARY OF THE HOLOCAUST

Antisemitism – Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews which may be expressed as prejudice towards, hatred of, or discrimination against, Jews. Antisemitism was not new to Nazi Germany or Europe; feelings of hatred and distrust of Jews had existed there for centuries.

Aryan - “Aryan” was used originally to identify peoples speaking the languages of Europe and India. The Nazis changed it to mean “superior race,” described as white, tall, athletic, with blond hair and blue eyes.

Auschwitz - Usually refers to Auschwitz-Birkenau, the largest Nazi concentration camp, located 37 miles west of Cracow, Poland. Established in 1940, it became a huge camp complex that included a killing center and slave labor camps.

Bar Mitzvah - Jewish religious ceremony held on a boy’s thirteenth birthday marking his passage into manhood.

Bat Mitzvah – Jewish religious ceremony held on a girl’s thirteenth birthday marking her passage into womanhood.

Blood Libel – An unfounded accusation that began in the Middle Ages rumoring that Jews kill Christian children to use their blood for the ritual of making wine as well as unleavened bread (matzah) for the Passover festival.

Bystander - One who is present at an event or who knows about its occurrence and chooses to ignore it. That is, they neither participate in, nor respond to it.

Collaborator - In the context of war, one who cooperates with the enemy who is occupying their country and/or persecuting their people.

Concentration camps - Nazi system for imprisoning those considered "enemies of the state." Many different groups and individuals were imprisoned in concentration camps: religious opponents, political opponents, resisters, homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Roma and Sinti (Gypsies), Poles, and Jews. Concentration camps were later further subdivided into labor camps and death camps. Before the end of World War II, several thousand of these concentration camps were operating throughout Europe, in all countries conquered by the German army, especially Poland, Austria and Germany. Thousands were killed there by starvation, mistreatment, and disease in camps, such as Bergen-Belsen, Mauthausen and Dachau

Crematoria - Furnaces constructed to burn human remains in the killing centers and concentration camps. The Germans had accepted bids for the construction of crematoria; many were built by German companies.

Death Camps - (Also called "extermination camps" or "killing centers") These were concentration camps created for the sole purpose of killing people. Victims were murdered in assembly-line fashion oftentimes in gas chambers, and their bodies burned in open fields or crematoria, or buried in mass graves. The Nazis operated six death camps: Sobibor, Belzec, Treblinka, Chelmno, Auschwitz and Majdanek.

Death March - A forced march of Nazi prisoners from the camps toward the German interior at the end of World War II when the German armed forces were trapped between the Soviets to the east and the advancing Allied troops from the west. Treated with enormous brutality during the forced marches, thousands of prisoners died by starvation, exhaustion, or were shot to death.

Dehumanization - Intended to change the manner in which a person or group of people are perceived. Dehumanization reduces the target group to objects therefore no longer human and worthy of human rights or dignity. This was done by identifying people by numbers in place of their names, or as animals like "pigs," or insects like "cockroaches."

Deportation - The act of being forced to leave where one is living. The Nazis coerced, tricked, and forced prisoners to leave their homes or ghettos, and board cattle cars destined for concentration camps and/or death camps. Prisoners in the overcrowded, unsanitary, cattle cars were given no food or water during the 2-4 day ride to the camps and many died.

Discrimination - An action that stems from prejudicial thinking that denies justice and fair treatment in employment, education, housing, or legal and civil rights.

Displaced Persons' Camps - (DP Camps) Camps set up after World War II as temporary living quarters for the thousands of homeless people created by the Holocaust. Because in almost all cases their homes had been looted, stolen and/or destroyed, Holocaust survivors no longer had homes to which to return. They lived in DP camps and then emigrated to new lives in the United States, Canada, Israel, Europe, South America, or Australia.

Einsatzgruppen - German name for the SS mobile killing squads that followed the German army into Russia and eastern Poland. They rounded up Jews and other "inferior people" in the conquered territories, forced their victims to dig their own graves, into which they were shot. At least one million Jews were killed by the Einsatzgruppen.

Euphemism - A euphemism is a nice way of saying something terrible or something you wish to hide. The Nazis used euphemisms to use their true intentions from victims and bystanders such as: "Final Solution," meaning the complete annihilation of all the Jews of Europe; "Resettlement in the East," meaning deportation to concentration camps; "Processing," meaning the selection, gassing, burning and disposal of people.

Evian Conference - A conference convened by U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt in July 1938 to discuss the problem of refugees. The thirty-two countries who met in Evian-les-Bains, France did not accomplish much since most western countries were reluctant to accept Jewish refugees. Hitler interpreted this to mean that no one cared about the Jews and that he could dispose of them as he wished.

Final Solution – The euphemism adopted at Wannsee Conference (January 1942) which refers to "the final solution to the Jewish question in Europe." This was the Nazi code for the murder of all European Jews.

Fuehrer - German word for "leader." In Nazi Germany, Adolf Hitler was the supreme leader and was called the Führer.

Genocide – The deliberate, systematic annihilation of a racial, religious, cultural, or political group of people. In genocide, people are persecuted and murdered because of membership in the targeted victim group. In addition to the Holocaust, genocide against targeted groups has also occurred in places like Cambodia (Asia), Bosnia (Eastern Europe), Rwanda (Africa), and Darfur (in Sudan, Africa).

Gentile – Someone who is not of the Jewish faith, most often referring to a Christian.

Gestapo – The Nazi Secret State Police, Geheime Staatspolizei, became infamous for its brutality. Gestapo policemen used torture and violence in interrogations. They coordinated the deportation of Jews to their deaths. And they harshly repressed resistance movements in Germany and in German-occupied Europe.

Ghetto – The Nazis revived the medieval 16th-century term “ghetto” to describe compulsory “Jewish quarters” in the poorest sections of the cities and towns they had conquered. Ghettos were closed off by walls or fences made of wood and barbed wire. Entire families were imprisoned in ghettos, including young children and the elderly. Ghettos were extremely crowded and unsanitary. Lack of food, clothing, medicine, and other supplies, severe winter weather, and the absence of adequate municipal services led to repeated outbreaks of epidemics and to very high mortality rates. With the implementation of the Final Solution in late 1941, most ghettos were systematically destroyed. Residents were either shot in mass graves located nearby or deported, usually by train, to death camps. The largest ghetto in Poland was the Warsaw Ghetto (pop. 450,000); other major ghettos were established in the cities of Lodz, Krakow, Bialystok, Lvov, Lublin, Vilna, Kovno, Czestochowa, and Minsk.

Holocaust – With a small “h,” holocaust comes from the Greek olokauston, and means “an offering consumed by fire.” With a capital “H” it means the destruction of the Jewish people of Europe by the Nazis during the period from 1933 to 1945.

Jehovah’s Witnesses – A religious sect that originated in the United States and had about 20,000 members in Germany in 1933. The religious beliefs of Jehovah’s Witnesses did not allow them to swear allegiance to any worldly power. They were, therefore, persecuted by the Nazis as “enemies of the state.” About 10,000 Witnesses were imprisoned in concentration camps; about 2,500 of them died.

Jewish Council – In German, Judenrat. Councils of Jewish leaders were established by the Nazis in the ghettos of German-occupied towns and cities to impose Nazi decrees on the Jews. The Nazis used Jewish Councils as buffers between themselves and the Jewish populations of the ghettos.

Kindertransport – German for “children's transport.” Between 1938 and 1940 the informal name of a rescue effort which brought thousands of refugee Jewish children to Great Britain from Nazi Germany. About 1,000 children were rescued, and some made it to the United States, including a few to Georgia.

Kristallnacht – German for “night of broken glass.” On November 9 and 10, 1938, nation-wide pogroms (anti-Jewish riots) occurred throughout Germany. This was the first organized, nation-wide, government-sanctioned vandalizing of property belonging to Jews by the Nazis. SA troops smashed store windows, burned synagogues, and beat up Jews in the streets, killing nearly 100 people. 30,000 Jewish men were arrested and imprisoned in Dachau concentration camp, near Munich. Several thousand Jewish women were arrested and sent to local jails. Kristallnacht was followed by a punitive fine to be paid by the Jewish community for the damages done to their own businesses.

Labor Camps – These were camps established to exploit the slave labor of prisoners to benefit the Third Reich. Many concentration and death camps had a system of labor camps attached. Prisoners were often worked to death in inhuman conditions. One of the most notorious labor camps was located at Auschwitz III. The labor of millions of slaves in camps brought profits to many German businesses, as well as the German military and government.

Liberation – As Allied and Soviet troops moved across Europe against Nazi Germany, they encountered concentration camps, mass graves, and other sites of Nazi crimes. Though liberation of Nazi camps was not a primary objective of the Allied military campaign, US, British, Canadian, and Soviet troops freed prisoners from their SS guards, provided aid to survivors, and collected evidence.

Liquidation – A Nazi euphemism for eliminating a ghetto and its inhabitants by conducting massive deportations to concentration and death camps, or by the mass murder of Jews on the outskirts of towns.

Mein Kampf – German for “my conquest.” The title of Adolf Hitler’s book, written in prison and published in 1925, that not only illustrated his bottomless antisemitism, but also served as blueprint for the Holocaust. Ownership of this book was mandatory in the Third Reich and the sale of the book made Hitler a millionaire.

Nazi – The abbreviation for Hitler’s political party, the National Socialist German Workers’ Party. The Nazi Party was a right-wing, nationalistic, and antisemitic political party formed in 1919 and headed by Adolf Hitler from 1921 to 1945.

Nuremberg Laws – Racial laws put into effect by the German parliament in Nuremberg on September 15, 1935. These laws became the basis for racist anti-Jewish policies and the legal exclusion of Jews from German life. The Reich Citizenship Law defined a citizen as a person who is “of German or related blood.” This meant that Jews, defined as a separate race, could not be full citizens of Germany. The Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honor banned future intermarriages between Jews and people “of German or related blood.” Similar anti-Jewish laws were imposed upon every nation occupied by the German army.

Partisan – A member of a resistance group operating secretly within enemy lines. Often hiding in forests, partisan groups used “hit-and-run” guerilla tactics against the Germans. Jewish partisans played a prominent role in parts of the Soviet Union and Poland where the geographical conditions aided such warfare. In the southern European countries of Yugoslavia and Greece, Jews joined general partisan units. In the western European countries of Belgium and France, resistance was characterized mainly by underground movements with Jews playing significant roles.

Perpetrator – One who does something that is morally wrong or criminal.

Persecution – Act of causing others to suffer because of difference in ethnic or cultural background, lifestyle, religion, or political beliefs.

Pogrom – Russian word for “devastation.” Organized violence, riots and lynchings aimed against Jews, often initiated and supported by religious and political authorities.

Propaganda – False or partly-false information used by a government or political party to sway the opinions of the population. Joseph Goebbels, Hitler’s minister of propaganda and a master of the manipulation of truth, used books, film, newspapers, and radio to further notions of racial superiority and the persecution of Jews.

Racism – Belief in the superiority of one race over another. The racism of the Third Reich was based on the idea that Jews were a subhuman race. Jews were to be killed in a racial war to “purify” Germany and the rest of the world of Jews. The racism of the Nazis also included people of African descent, Mediterranean descent, Slavs, Poles, and Roma & Sinti (Gypsies).

Refugee – One who flees their country in search of safety in times of war, political oppression, or religious persecution.

Rescuer – One who saves the life of a persecuted person or group, usually at the risk of their own life.

Resistor – One who opposes those in power for the preservation of one’s own human dignity or the dignity of persecuted others. Resistance can be organized and physical, as in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. It can also be cultural, as in the many schools, soup kitchens, and arts groups established in the ghettos. Or, resistance can be spiritual, as in the celebration of Jewish holidays in the concentration camps; participants risked being killed on the spot if caught.

Romani – (“Gypsies”) The Roma and Sinti are nomadic people believed to have come originally from northwest India. Traveling in small caravans, Romani first appeared in Western Europe in the 1400s and eventually spread to every country of Europe. Approximately 250,000 to 500,000 Romani are believed to have died in Nazi camps or killed by Einsatzgruppen and other shootings.

SA – Abbreviation for Sturmabteilung, the German for “storm troopers,” a special armed and uniformed branch of the Nazi party. They were also called “Brownshirts” because of the color of their uniforms. The SA was integral to the rise of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party, violently enforcing party norms and attempting to influence elections.

Scapegoat – A person or group of people unfairly blamed for natural disasters or wrong actions done by others. The Jews were the scapegoats of the Nazis, and unfairly blamed for all of the economic, political, and cultural problems in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s.

Shtetl – The Yiddish word for small Jewish town or village.

Slave Labor – The Nazi system of exploiting for no pay the physical energy and skills of Jewish and other prisoners to serve the German economy. Prisoners were forced to work long hours in factories or in the fields. The conditions that were so deplorable that many died of exhaustion, starvation, or disease.

SS – Abbreviation for the German Schutzstaffel, Hitler's elite guard, headed by Heinrich Himmler. There were many divisions of the SS and one of the most powerful was the Gestapo. The Einsatzgruppen were also members of the SS, as well as the Death's Head Regiment whose members became commandants of concentration and death camps. Known as the "Blackshirts," they wore black uniforms and became known throughout Europe as Hitler's butchers, the most dreaded group of all who were given daggers and sworn to kill all who were enemies of Hitler, even their own brothers, upon graduation from special SS schools.

Star of David – A six-pointed star, symbol of the Jewish religion. Jews were required to wear a yellow star on their clothing for identification and to make them easy targets.

Stereotype – An oversimplified generalization about a person or group of people without regard for individual differences. Jews were stereotyped by the Germans of the Third Reich.

Survivor – One who experienced a devastating event, like the Holocaust, and lived.

Swastika – An ancient Eastern symbol adopted by the Nazis as their emblem.

Third Reich – “Reich” is German for “empire.” The Third Reich is the official name of the Nazi regime. Historically, the First Reich was the medieval Holy Roman Empire, which lasted until 1806. The Second Reich included the German Empire, from 1871 to 1918. Hitler expected the Third Reich to last one thousand years; however, it lasted only twelve from 1933 to 1945.

Totalitarian – A government or doctrine in which one political party or political group maintains complete control of a population even to the intimate, private details of an individual’s life such as one’s friendships.

Victim – One who is intended for persecution or death; also known as a “target.”

Visa – Legal permission distributed by a government enabling an individual to enter that country. Persecuted Jews had to possess not only a German passport, but also a Visa from another country permitting them entry in order to leave Germany.

Wannsee Conference – A gathering of top Nazi officials held on January 20, 1942, at Lake Wannsee (vahn zey) in Berlin where “The Final Solution” and other steps were approved which would lead to the total annihilation of European Jews.

Yiddish – The language spoken by European Jews, particularly those living in Central and Eastern Europe before the Holocaust, that combines elements of German and Hebrew and written in Hebrew letters.

Yom HaShoah – Holocaust Memorial Day established to commemorate the Holocaust and the six million Jews who perished. It is held on the anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, April 19, 1943 which falls on the 27th day of the Hebrew month of Nisan.