

Voices

When they filled in the bunker [of the gas chamber] with all the women, they put the men in. And sometimes they had 20 or 30 extra people that they couldn't get in, so they always held back children. And when the bunker was already so filled they couldn't put no more people, no more . . . they made the kids crawl on the top of the heads, all the way in there, just kept on pushing them in, to fill them all in . . . And that took about five to ten minutes. In the door they had a little peephole with four or five layers of glass in between, and it was with bars so nobody could break the glass through. And when they turned on the light . . . you could see whether the people were already dead or not.

— Sam Itzkowitz, a Polish Holocaust survivor, in 1991, describing methods used in the camps

The Holocaust

The **Holocaust** — or *Shoah*, in Hebrew — is the name given to the Nazis' deliberate murder of millions of European Jews during World War II.

Before the end of the war, Allied countries had known about the concentration camps, and some people had tried to make the world aware of the horrors that were taking place. But it was only when Allied troops began liberating the camps that the extent of the mass murder was exposed. Troops found gas chambers where people had been killed, crematoriums filled with human remains, mass graves, and heaps of unburied, emaciated bodies. Thousands of those still alive were near death.

The “Final Solution”

Hitler and the Nazis had also tried to eliminate millions of other people they considered undesirable: Roma, communists, gay men, Africans, people with disabilities, Freemasons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and political prisoners from various countries. The Jews, however, were the prime target of what Hitler called the “Final Solution.”

Historians estimate that about nine million Jews lived in Europe before World War II. By the end of the war, about six million were dead. This number included a million children.

The mass killing of Jews began in the fall of 1941 with Operation Reinhard, a plan to murder the Jews of occupied Poland. The first three killing centres were built at Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka. In other camps, such as Auschwitz, prisoners were worked to death under brutal conditions. Those too young, too old, or too weak to work were killed in gas chambers, shot, or left to die of starvation or disease.



Figure 10–26 When Allied forces liberated the Mauthausen-Gusen Concentration Camp in Austria, these were some of the survivors they found. Mauthausen, which had a particularly brutal reputation, was used mainly for political prisoners, who were subjected to a program of “extermination through work.” When there are no more survivors of the Holocaust, do you think photos like this will continue to tell the real story of what occurred? Explain your answer.

Justice

After the liberation of the death camps, and once the extent of the murders and atrocities became known, people called for those responsible to be brought to justice. The Allies took German citizens to the camps to see what had occurred there.

Many said they had not realized the extent of the horrors. Others said they knew but had been afraid to resist. And many of the bureaucrats who had documented what had happened claimed that they were simply following orders and that they, too, feared the military authorities.

The Prosecution of War Crimes

Like Hitler, some key Nazi leaders committed suicide. Others fled and assumed a new identity in other countries. Still others were arrested and charged with various war crimes, including crimes against humanity.

In 1946, at the first of more than a dozen trials of Nazi war criminals, 21 prominent German leaders were tried for war crimes. The tribunal heard 240 witnesses, examined 300 000 sworn statements, watched Nazi propaganda films, and saw films of the camps being liberated. Nine months later, the verdicts were handed down: three defendants were acquitted, seven received prison sentences, and twelve were sentenced to death. A separate tribunal would deal with war crimes committed by the Japanese.

These **international tribunals** became a model for the trials that took place more than 50 years later at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda.



Figure 10–27 Leading Nazi figures sit in the prisoners' box during the first international tribunal at Nuremberg in 1946. What would a trial like this achieve?

Recall . . . Reflect . . . Respond

1. The war crime trials that took place at the end of World War II were organized and carried out by the victors. Should the wartime actions of the victors also have been examined and assessed in a court of law? Explain your response.
2. Writers, filmmakers, and historians have tried to keep alive the story of the Holocaust and other crimes committed during World War II. Develop three criteria that you could use to assess the success of their efforts.

Check Forward →

You will read more about international issues that emerged after World War II in Chapter 11.

Voices

[When we are liberated, German citizens are brought to the camps so that they would know what had been done by their own government.] A middle-aged German woman approaches me.

“We didn’t know anything. We had no idea. You must believe me. Did you have to work hard also?”

“Yes,” I whisper.

“At your age, it must’ve been difficult.”

At my age. What does she mean? . . . “How old do you think I am?”

She looks at me uncertainly. “Sixty? Sixty-two?”

“Sixty? I am fourteen. Fourteen years old.”

She gives a little shriek and makes the sign of the cross. In horror and disbelief she walks away, and joins the crowd of German civilians.

— Livia Bitton-Jackson, in her memoir about growing up in the Holocaust, *I Have Lived a Thousand Years*, 1997