

# THE ROAD TO GENOCIDE

Relevant for: World History | Topic: The Second World War

Visitors walking past the infamous entrance gate that reads: 'Arbeit macht frei' ('Work sets one free') at the Sachsenhausen concentration camp memorial on Oranienburg, Germany. | Photo Credit: [Getty Images](#)

The 27th of January marked the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, a date that is now observed as 'International Holocaust Remembrance Day'. Of the 5.5 million-6 million people killed in the Holocaust, about 9,60,000 are believed to have died at the Auschwitz complex, built to house both concentration and extermination camps. (The former were built by the Third Reich to imprison people it considered 'undesirable'; the extermination camps served to obliterate them on an industrial scale.) As we reflect on the millions who were 'exterminated' (a term usually associated with pest control) it might be worth recalling how the Jewish people were first isolated and ostracised and then stripped of their humanity.

By 1945, the 'Final Solution' to the 'Jewish problem', the careful euphemism using which the Germans meant to kill every last Jew in Europe, claimed two-thirds of Europe's Jewish population. However, as most historians agree, it is important to note that there was probably no single decision taken by the Nazis to rid Europe of its Jewish population; instead, the 'Final Solution' was enabled by a series of incremental policies and pronouncements by the regime from the time they came to power. If the horror of the emerging policies was apparent to those within and outside the country, it seems they chose to look away.

The first stage was the identification and registration of all Jews, which then enabled the confiscation of their property under various pretexts, followed by the passage of laws to circumscribe their citizenship, means of livelihood and access to legal remedies. The state-sponsored intimidation, impoverishment and alienation succeeded in driving out about 37,000 Jewish people in 1933 alone. When the violence of Nazi party activists started affecting Germany's image and economy in 1935, Hitler, mindful of the upcoming Munich Olympics in 1936, had the activists reined in. However, they were placated through legislation.

The Nuremberg Laws of 1935 defined 'Jewishness' and 'German citizenship'. The first of the two laws clarified who was 'Jewish' and forbade intermarriage between Germans and Jewish people, in addition to disallowing the employment of German women under the age of 45 in Jewish households: the statute was tellingly named the 'Law to Protect German Blood and German Honour'. German citizenship was defined by blood, and continually reaffirmed through 'conduct', requiring the citizen to be "willing and fit to serve the German People and Reich". Together, these laws completed the social and economic segregation and stigmatisation of an entire community. This state-sponsored persecution culminated in Kristallnacht, the Night of Broken Glass, in November 1938, when Nazi paramilitaries and civilians attacked Jewish homes, businesses, hospitals and synagogues, while German authorities looked on.

Those that did not or could not emigrate were driven into ghettos following the Nazi invasion of Poland in 1939. The ghettos allowed Nazi functionaries to efficiently round up whole families for concentration camps by 1941. All the while, the demonisation of Jews ensured that they began to be considered 'subhuman', a phrase used by Field Marshal Walter von Reichenau in 1941 in his now infamous 'Severity Order'.

Reichenau, through the order promulgated on October 10, 1941, asked the German Sixth Army (of the Eastern Front) to remember that "the most important objective of this campaign against

the Jewish Bolshevik system is the complete destruction of its sources of power and the extermination of the Asiatic influence in European civilisation.” It went on to state that “for this reason, the soldier must learn to fully appreciate the necessity for the severe but just retribution that must be meted out to the subhuman species of Jewry.” Thus, having stripped them of their humanity, the regime moved with clinical efficiency to annihilate the Jewish people.

Reichenau’s carefully phrased term “severe but just retribution” was code for killing, and similar versions were circulated amongst different commands, so that large parts of the Wehrmacht were ordered to treat Jews as partisans and kill them. This led to one of the most brutal phases in the Holocaust whereby Einsatzgruppen, or Nazi death squads, in collaboration with the Wehrmacht and local auxiliary units in German-occupied territories in Poland and the Soviet Union rounded up and shot 1.3 million Jews. Initially, the squads gathered Jewish men and boys, along with members of the intelligentsia and political opponents (not all of whom were Jews). They were then executed on various trumped-up charges, ranging from attempts to escape, to inciting disaffection. Over time, the fig leaf of cause was discarded; simultaneously, the net was widened to include women and children.

The two most infamous killings of the Einsatzgruppen were the massacres of Babi Yar, near Kiev, when 33,771 Jews are said to have been murdered; and Rumbula, near Riga, which claimed 25,000 lives in two days in November and December 1941. Details from Babi Yar are sufficient to demonstrate the dehumanising brutality meted out. Between September 29 and 30, 1941, a total of 33,771 Jews were reportedly rounded up and taken to a ravine just outside Kiev, required to undress and leave their valuables in a pile. They were then marched in orderly lots to the ravine, made to lie down and shot at point blank range in the neck or head. Thereafter, the next group was marched in, made to lie on the bodies, and similarly executed. After two days of shooting, the Germans blasted the walls of the ravine to bury the victims, not all of whom had died by then. Their clothes and valuables were distributed amongst local ethnic Germans.

Compounding the tragedy was the fact that the Einsatzgruppen were assisted by locals, often in a ratio of 10 locals to 1 paramilitary. The invading Germans were also successful in instigating locals to riot against Jewish people as they marched into newly captured territories; in the six months following the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, over 60 pogroms in Latvia, Lithuania and Ukraine claimed about 24,000 Jewish lives. However, the shootings were proving inefficient and costly. When the ‘Final Solution’ was agreed to in January 1942, the numbers were too great and army commanders were complaining that the shootings were affecting soldiers’ morale.

And so, the logical next step was to industrialise the killings, using the gas chambers. The Nazis had experimented with gas earlier, when they euthanised those they branded as “undesirable” or weak. The gas chambers scaled up the operation. The example of Auschwitz should suffice. Historians estimate that of the 1.3 million who were sent to Auschwitz, 1.1 million died — most killed by gassing, the rest felled by disease, exhaustion or starvation.

Of the 1.3 million, only 2,05,000 were registered, which means that they were separated on arrival as they were considered fit enough to work; 25,000 were sent to other camps; and 8,65,000 are believed to have been sent directly to the gas chambers. By 1942, four additional gas chambers with their attached crematoria were built in Auschwitz II, with a rail spur leading directly to chambers II and III; each of the gas chambers could hold 2,000 people (though they often held more) and the combined capacity of the crematoria and outside incineration pits was 20,000 corpses a day.

Those to be ‘exterminated’ were led to chambers under the guise of being deloused, made to undress and sent into what looked like a shower room; once they were inside, the chamber was

sealed and the cyanide released into it via specially constructed openings. Death in those frantically overcrowded rooms occurred after some minutes of terror. The corpses were then harvested: any remaining jewellery was removed, the women's hair was cut to be sold in the market, and dentists extracted gold fillings from the teeth of the dead. Between 1940 and 1942, 50 kg of gold was collected. By 1944, 10 kg-12 kg of gold was being harvested each month. The dehumanisation of the exterminated was complete.

As head of the SS, Heinrich Himmler, was to explain to his lieutenants at Posen (in occupied Poland) on October 6, 1943, "We were faced with the question: what about the women and children? – I have decided on a solution to this problem. I did not consider myself justified to exterminate the men only — in other words, to kill them or have them killed while allowing the avengers, in the form of their children, to grow up in the midst of our sons and grandsons. The difficult decision had to be made to have this people disappear from the earth."

This is what death looks like when we dehumanise the dying. It sullies us all. May we never forget.

Priyanjali Malik is a London-based researcher

You have reached your limit for free articles this month.

Register to The Hindu for free and get unlimited access for 30 days.

Already have an account ? [Sign in](#)

Sign up for a 30-day free trial. [Sign Up](#)

Find mobile-friendly version of articles from the day's newspaper in one easy-to-read list.

Enjoy reading as many articles as you wish without any limitations.

A select list of articles that match your interests and tastes.

Move smoothly between articles as our pages load instantly.

A one-stop-shop for seeing the latest updates, and managing your preferences.

We brief you on the latest and most important developments, three times a day.

\*Our Digital Subscription plans do not currently include the e-paper ,crossword, iPhone, iPad mobile applications and print. Our plans enhance your reading experience.

*Why you should pay for quality journalism - [Click to know more](#)*

Please enter a valid email address.

To reassure Indian Muslims, the PM needs to state that the govt. will not conduct an exercise like NRC

Subscribe to The Hindu now and get unlimited access.

Already have an account? [Sign In](#)

Sign up for a 30-day free trial. [Sign Up](#)

To continue enjoying The Hindu, You can turn off your ad blocker or [Subscribe to The Hindu](#).

[Sign up for a 30 day free trial.](#)

**END**

Downloaded from **crackIAS.com**

© **Zuccess App** by crackIAS.com

CrackIAS.com