

# Studying the Holocaust

## RESISTANCE, RESCUE AND SURVIVAL

## 1. History/Orientation

### Overview

Jewish people have lived in Europe for more than two thousand years. Jewish communities existed in Eastern Europe, Western Europe, and in countries such as Greece and Turkey. These Jewish communities were diverse, varying in traditions, customs and language.

In 1933, the Nazi party was elected to government in Germany and Adolf Hitler was appointed Chancellor. In 1934 Hitler became dictator. Hitler and the Nazi party quickly put into practice their belief that Germans were "racially superior." The Jewish people of Germany (less than 1 percent of the population) were not only defined as "inferior," but became the primary target for Nazi hatred.

On September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland and World War II began. The Polish army was quickly defeated, and the German forces continued on to occupy Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, France, Yugoslavia and Greece.

In 1941, the German army invaded the Soviet Union, and in 1941 – 1942, six major killing centers were established in Poland — *Belzec*, *Chelmno*, *Sobibor*, *Treblinka*, *Majdanek* and *Auschwitz-Birkenau*. These camps existed only, or primarily for, the purpose of killing people. Other camps — concentration camps and labor camps — were used for holding people and/or slave labor.

In January 1945, the Russian armies moved west, overtaking many of the areas that had been occupied by the Germans. Auschwitz, along with several other camps, was liberated. In May 1945, the war came to an end as the Allies marched into Germany and Poland and the German army surrendered. Six million of the 9 million Jews in Europe, and 5 million others were killed in what later became known as the "Holocaust."

### Why the Jews?

The origins of anti-semitism go back many centuries:  
[ushmm.org/outreach/asemit.htm](http://ushmm.org/outreach/asemit.htm)

### Resources

For more information on the history of the Holocaust:

- **The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum:**  
[ushmm.org](http://ushmm.org)
- **The Simon Wiesenthal Center's Museum of Tolerance:** [motlc.wiesenthal.org](http://motlc.wiesenthal.org)