Common Questions about the Holocaust

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WAS HITLER SOLELY RESPONSIBLE FOR THE HOLOCAUST?

Hitler did not make the Holocaust happen by himself. Many Germans and non-Germans contributed to/or benefited from the so-called "Final Solution" (the term used by the Nazis for their plan to annihilate the European Jews). In addition to the SS, German government, military, and Nazi Party officials who planned and implemented policies aimed at persecuting and murdering the European Jews, many "ordinary" people—civil servants, doctors, lawyers, judges, soldiers, and railroad workers—played a role in the Holocaust.

WHY DIDN'T JEWS LEAVE WHEN THE NAZIS CAME TO POWER?

Like their fellow citizens, German Jews were patriotic citizens. More than 10,000 died fighting for Germany in World War I, and countless others were wounded and received medals for their valor and service. The families of many Jews who held German citizenship, regardless of class or profession, had lived in Germany for centuries and were well assimilated by the early 20th century. From 1933–39, the German government passed and enforced discriminatory laws targeting Jews at a relatively gradual pace. Up until the nationwide anti-Jewish violence of 1938, known as Kristallnacht, many Jews in Germany expected to be able to hold out against Nazi-sponsored persecution, as they hoped for positive change in German politics. Before World War II, few could imagine or predict killing squads and killing centers.

Those who made the difficult decision to leave Germany still had to find a country willing to admit them and their family. The search for safe haven was very difficult. The Evian Conference of 1938 showed this when almost every nation in attendance declined to change its immigration policies. Even when a new country could be found, a great deal of time, paperwork, support, and sometimes money was needed to get there. In many cases, these obstacles could not be overcome.

WHY WASN'T THERE MORE RESISTANCE FROM JEWS?

The statement that Jews did not fight back against the Germans and their allies is false. Jews carried out acts of resistance in every German-occupied country and in the territory of Germany's Axis partners. Against impossible odds, they resisted in ghettos, concentration camps, and killing centers. There were many factors that made resistance difficult, however, including a lack of weapons and resources, deception, fear, and the overwhelming power of the Germans and their collaborators.

HOW DID THE PERPETRATORS KNOW WHO WAS JEWISH?

German officials identified Jews residing in Germany through census records, tax returns, synagogue membership lists, parish records (for converted Jews), routine but mandatory police registration forms, the questioning of relatives, and from information provided by neighbors and officials. In territory occupied by Nazi Germany or its Axis partners, Jews were identified largely through Jewish community membership lists, individual identity papers, captured census documents and police records, and local intelligence networks.

WHAT HAPPENED IF YOU DISOBEYED AN ORDER TO PARTICIPATE IN AN ATROCITY?

Germans who refused to participate in atrocities were generally not punished, but risked peer, social, and sometimes professional exclusion, or disadvantage. They could request other duties, such as guard duty or crowd control. There is no reliable evidence that German soldiers or police officials were killed for refusing

to kill civilians. Non-Germans serving as auxiliaries and refusing to carry out direct orders to kill could be subject to discipline, dismissal, imprisonment, or even death.

WASN'T ONE OF HITLER'S RELATIVES JEWISH?

Rumors about Hitler's ancestry were circulated by political opponents as a way of discrediting Hitler's leadership of an antisemitic party. The rumors are derived largely —then and now—from the fact that the identity of Hitler's paternal grandfather remains unknown. There is no reliable evidence, however, to suggest that the unknown grandfather was Jewish.

WHY WERE THE JEWS SINGLED OUT FOR EXTERMINATION?

The basis for Nazi antisemitism—prejudice against or hatred of Jewish people—was the Nazis' distorted worldview of human history as racial struggle. The Nazis falsely considered the Jews to be a race. They incorrectly believed Jews had a natural impulse, inherited through generations, to strive for world domination, and that this goal would not only prevent German dominance but would also enslave and destroy the German "race." The Nazis believed that all of history was a fight between races, which would culminate either in the triumph of the superior "Aryan" race or in its total extinction. As a result, Nazi leaders considered the death of all Jews to be a precondition necessary for the survival and the eventual dominance of the so-called "German-Aryan" race. According to the Nazis, the Jews, as an "inferior" race, would use their supposed control of world finances and of world mass media to support Communist uprisings and to encourage other "inferior" races to overwhelm and triumph against Nordic-Germanic races.

Nazi antisemitism linked traditional negative and false images of Jews and their behavior with modern pseudo-scientific beliefs. Among these stereotypes were those derived from centuries-old Christian anti-Jewish thinking, which incorrectly presented Jews as murderers of Christ, agents of the devil, and practitioners of witchcraft. The Nazis linked these negative stereotypes to a "Jewish way of thinking" that they believed was based in genetics and, therefore, not subject to change. The Nazis used this belief to justify the discrimination, persecution, and, eventually, physical murder of Jewish people.

WHAT DID THE UNITED STATES KNOW ABOUT THE HOLOCAUST AND HOW DID IT RESPOND?

Despite a history of providing sanctuary to persecuted peoples, the United States grappled with many issues during the 1930s that made living up to this legacy difficult. These issues included widespread antisemitism, xenophobia, isolationism, and a sustained economic depression. Unfortunately for those fleeing Nazi persecution, such issues greatly impacted US refugee policy, reinforcing an official and popular unwillingness to expand immigration quotas to admit greater numbers of people endangered by Nazi persecution and aggression at a time when doing so might have saved lives.

Over the years, scholarly investigation into US responses in the era of the Holocaust has raised several questions, such as: What did the United States know? What did government officials and civilians do with this knowledge? Could more have been done? Scholars have examined US immigration policy, the reactions of the US government to reported atrocities, and sluggish efforts to organize operations aimed at rescuing European Jews.

Debates have sparked over key events, including the voyage of the *St. Louis*, the establishment of the War Refugee Board, the role of the American Jewish community, US media coverage of Nazi crimes and violence, and the contentious question of bombing Auschwitz. The topic continues to evolve with the introduction of new documentation and revised hypotheses.