**[America at War: World War II](http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/database/subtitles.cfm?TitleID=75)**

**The Holocaust**

**Period:** 1940s

At 3 p.m., January 27, 1945, Russian troops of the 100th and 107th divisions entered Auschwitz, a village in southern Poland 30 miles west of Krakow. There, inside Auschwitz's concentration camps, they found 7,600 inmates--including Otto Frank, the father of Anne Frank. The discovery of the concentration camps revealed World War II's most terrible secret: the Holocaust. Two days later, the U.S. 7th Army liberated Dachau, another notorious Nazi death camp located outside of Munich. The liberators could scarcely believe what they saw: starving prisoners with bones protruding from their skin and serial numbers tattooed on their arms; stacks of half-burned corpses; and piles of human hair.

Auschwitz was not the first Nazi concentration camp--that dubious distinction belonged to Dachau, which was set up in 1933--but it was the most infamous. At Auschwitz, 1.6 million people died. Of the victims, 1.3 million were Jews and 300,000 were Gypsies, Polish Catholics, and Russian prisoners of war. Altogether, people from 28 nations lost their lives there, including the disabled, homosexuals, political prisoners, and other deemed unfit to survive by Adolf Hitler's Third Reich.

Auschwitz had two main areas. "Auschwitz I" contained a gas chamber and a crematorium and provided housing for prisoners used in slave labor and in Dr. Josef Mengele's medical experimentation station (where one experiment involved seeing how long babies survived without food).

"Auschwitz II-Birkenau" contained four gas chambers and crematoria. It was here that cattle cars dumped their exhausted passengers. Prisoners entered through a gate inscribed with the infamous words "Work Will Make You Free." SS guards directed each new arrival to the left or to the right. The healthy and strong went to the right. The weak, the elderly, and the very young went up a ramp to the left--to the gas chambers, disguised as showers. Inmates were told that the showers were used to disinfect them, but they contained no plumbing, and the shower heads were fake. Guards injected Zyklon B through openings in the ceilings and walls, then cremated the bodies. The ashes were used as road filler and fertilizer or simply dumped into surrounding ponds and fields.

Auschwitz was a product of Adolf Hitler's demented belief that Germans constituted a master race which had a right to kill those they deemed inferior. "Nature is cruel, therefore, we too may be cruel," Hitler stated in 1934. "If I can send the flower of the German nation into the hell of war...then surely I have a right to remove millions of an inferior race that breeds like vermin!"

In 1941 and 1942, the Nazi fuehrer initiated the "Final Solution to the Jewish Problem." The Nazis did their best to disguise their murderous scheme behind euphemisms and camouflage, but sometimes the truth slipped out. Heinrich Himmler, the official in charge of carrying out the final solution, explained to his top officers: "In public we will never speak of it. I am referring to the annihilation of the Jewish people. In our history, this is an unwritten and never-to-be written page of glory."

In the spring of 1944, four prisoners escaped from Auschwitz, carrying tangible proof of the Nazi's systematic program of mass murder. In mid-July, American and British leaders learned what was happening at Auschwitz, but they rejected pleas to bomb the gas chambers or the roads and rail lines leading to the camps. Military officials opposed the bombing because it would divert "considerable air support essential to the success of our forces now engaged in decisive operations."

This was not the first time that Western help failed to come. During the 1930s, the U.S. State Department blocked efforts by Jewish refugees to migrate to the United States. Between 1933 and 1945, the United States allowed only 132,000 Jewish refugees to enter the country, just 10 percent of the quota allowed by law. This opposition to Jewish immigration, in turn, reflected widespread anti-Semitism. As late as 1939, opinion polls indicated that 53 percent of Americans agreed with the statement, "Jews are different and should be restricted." In the end, less than 500,000 Jews (out of 6.5 million) survived in Nazi-occupied Europe.

The Holocaust was a singular and unique event in human history. Never before had a sovereign state, with the cooperation of bureaucrats, industrialists, and civilians, sought systematically to exterminate an entire people. Yet many wonder whether Auschwitz's terrible lesson has been learned. Despite the establishment of Israel, improved Christian-Jewish relations, and heightened sensitivity to racism, many remain ignorant of the past. A 1995 opinion poll found that 5 percent of Americans deny that the Holocaust occurred and 10 percent express doubts or ignorance. More than half a century after the liberation of Auschwitz, "ethnic cleansing" and the persecution of religious, racial, and ethnic groups continues in Bosnia, China, Guatemala, India, Sri Lanka, Turkey, and elsewhere.