

ADL / Overview of the Holocaust: 1933–1945

Adolf Hitler, the leader of the Nationalist Socialist German Workers Party (Nazi Party), one of the strongest parties in Germany, became Chancellor of Germany on January 30, 1933. Between 1933 and 1945, Nazi Germany and its collaborators murdered six million Jews and five million other civilians, including Sinti and Roma people, Poles, people with physical and mental disabilities, gay men, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Soviet prisoners of war and political dissidents. Even though Jews comprised less than one percent of the total German population in 1933 (600,000), Hitler used anti-Semitism as a political weapon to gain popular support, blaming Jews for all of Germany’s problems—their defeat in World War I, economic depression, and the Bolshevik threat of communism. That Hitler’s accusations were blatantly contradictory and his facts often fabricated made little difference.

By the early 1930s, many in the Jewish population in the country had resided in Germany for generations and were engaged in all levels of social and professional society. The German Jews felt a strong loyalty and kinship for their German heritage. More than 100,000 German Jews served in the army in World War I and 12,000 died in the line of duty. This strong sense of identity, both as Germans and Jews, made the reality of the early measures against them even more baffling and difficult to accept. However, the long history of anti-Semitism in Europe and Germany allowed Hitler’s attacks against the Jews to take hold among the German citizens. The German people believed his accusations or were at least willing to go along with him.

Once in control, Hitler solidified his position by putting an end to democracy in Germany. He did this by invoking the Enabling Act—emergency decrees of the German constitution which suspended individual freedoms and gave extraordinary powers to the executive. Hitler began to quickly escalate his campaign of intimidation, terror, and violence. He moved to ostracize Jews in all sectors of German society: economic, political, cultural, and social. The Nazis were able to use the government, the police, the courts, the schools, the newspapers, and radio to implement their racist ideology. This ideology held that Germans were “racially superior” and there was a struggle for survival between their race, the Aryan or “master race,” and other inferior people. While Hitler’s terror was waged against anyone deemed an “enemy of the state,” including communists, trade unionists, and other “radicals,” Jews were marked as the lowest race with extreme vengeance.

Under the banner “The Jews are our misfortune,” between 1933 and 1939 the Nazi State legislated restrictions against Jews designed to force them out of Germany’s economic, political, and social life. All non-Aryans (who had Jewish parents or two or more Jewish grandparents) were expelled from the civil service. In 1933, the government called for a general boycott of all Jewish-owned businesses and passed laws excluding Jews from journalism, radio,



1935 chart from Nazi Germany used to explain the Nuremberg Laws, which employed a pseudo-scientific basis for racial identification.

People with four German grandparents (four white circles in top row left) were of “German blood,” while people who descended from three or four Jewish grandparents (black circles in top row right) were classified as Jews. In the middle stood people of “mixed blood” of the “first or second degree.”

Timeline

January 30–February 1, 1933
Adolf Hitler appointed chancellor of Germany.

March 22, 1933
The Nazis establish the Dachau (Germany) concentration camp to imprison (without any trial) people they consider their enemies.

March 24, 1933
The Nazis sponsor the Enabling Act, a bill that would give Hitler's government dictatorial powers for four years.

April 1, 1933
The Nazis declare a boycott of all Jewish businesses in Germany.

April 7, 1933
The Nazi government declares that Jews are debarred from working in the civil service and strips them of their equal rights.

April 25, 1933
The school quota system limits the number of Jewish high school and university students in Germany.

May 10, 1933
The Nazis burn thousands of anti-Nazi Jewish-authored and "degenerate" books.

July 14, 1933
Forced sterilization of German citizens with congenital disabilities begins.

January 13, 1935
Germany reclaims the Saar region in accordance with the Treaty of Versailles.

March 16, 1935
Military conscription in Germany begins, violating the Treaty of Versailles.

May 31, 1935
The German army becomes "all-Aryan," meaning Jews are not allowed to serve.

September 15, 1935
The Nuremberg Laws are enacted, defining who is a Jew according to racial theory,

farming, teaching, the theater, and films. The next year, Jews were dismissed from the army and excluded from practicing medicine, law and business. However, the Nuremberg Laws passed in 1935 came as the greatest blow. Jews, even German-born Jews, were stripped of their German citizenship. These laws created a climate in which Jews were viewed as inferior or subhuman.

Stormtroopers boycotting outside of Israel's department store in Berlin. The signs read: "Germans! Defend yourselves! Don't buy from Jews."

Photo courtesy of Deutsches Bundesarchiv (German Federal Archive), Bild 102-14469.



By the late 1930s, Jews were completely separated from non-Jews. They could not eat, drink, go to school, or socialize with German Christians. Jews could no longer own cars, bikes, or pets; the list of legal prohibitions was extensive. To legislate, enforce, and administer his systematic campaign of persecution, Hitler used the local police, judges, and legislators, the very people entrusted to serve, protect, and administer justice to all people. Jews at all times had to carry their identification documents, which were stamped with a capital "J" or the word "Jude" (the German word for Jew). All Jews were forced to use Hebrew middle names—Israel for men and Sarah for women. These names were officially recorded on all birth and marriage certificates.

While Hitler and the Nazi party did not invent the use of propaganda to sway public opinion or build loyalty, the Nazis brought the use of it to new extremes during the years preceding the war. Joseph Goebbels, as the Minister of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda, made sure every form of expression in Germany—from textbooks, to music, to art and film—carried the same message of the purity and righteousness of the German Aryan race and the evils and dangers of the Jews. Massive rallies were held to build obedience and loyalty to the Nazi party and national holidays were created to celebrate the Germans' leader and party. Beginning at the age of six, the Aryan children of Germany enrolled in Nazi youth groups. By 1939, 90% of these children belonged to various groups of the Nazi youth movement. Hitler was quoted as saying that the key to his success was the youth of Germany, and his goal was to create a "violently active, dominating, intrepid and brutal youth." He succeeded.

At the same time as the Nazis waged their increasingly hateful campaign to get rid of the Jewish presence in Germany, Hitler strengthened and extended his private army of terror. In 1934, the SS (Security Police) was established as Hitler's elite force. Along with the Gestapo (Special State Police), the SS proceeded to

weed out and eliminate any opposition. The SS set up concentration camps throughout Germany. Without being officially charged, anyone suspected of disloyalty or disobedience would be sent there. Dachau, the first concentration camp, was opened in 1933 to hold such “enemies of the State.”

Hitler reintroduced the military draft in 1935, in violation of the World War I Versailles Treaty. In 1936, German troops marched into the Rhineland and Hitler signed an agreement with Italy’s fascist dictator, Mussolini, to establish the Berlin-Rome Axis. In March 1938, German troops invaded Austria and were met with no resistance. Austria became part of greater Germany in what was known as “The Anschluss” or joining. Hitler next seized the Sudetenland, an area of Czechoslovakia where many Germans lived. He claimed that he was only interested in taking back areas that were already inhabited by Germans. The government leaders of Great Britain and France chose to believe him.

By September 1, 1939, it was abundantly clear that Hitler could not be held at his word. German tanks and bombers entered Poland and within three weeks crushed all organized resistance. On September 3, England and France declared war against Germany, and World War II commenced. For Hitler, the war provided two opportunities to fulfill Germany’s destiny: first, to gain additional territory, living space or “Lebensraum,” for the German people, and second (and equally important), to rid Europe of all of its Jews.

By the time the war broke out, Hitler had already turned Germany into a police state and had long begun its campaign of terror and persecution. As early as 1933, obsessed with obtaining a pure Aryan race, the Nazis began a program designed to “improve the human race through selective breeding” (eugenics). Laws were passed to reduce the number of “inferior” people through a program of forced sterilization, making them incapable of reproduction. The first victims of this program were people who doctors decided were “mentally deficient.” In 1933, about 500 children of black French soldiers and German women living in the Rhineland were forcibly sterilized. The medical establishment’s approval of this campaign led to the adoption of so-called “euthanasia” or mercy killings. Over 450,000 people were sterilized or killed in special institutions and hospitals before the program was ended.

Trade unionists, political opponents, and others labeled by the Nazis as “enemies of the State” were arrested and sent to concentration camps. Under the 1935 Nazi-revised criminal code, as many as 15,000 gay men were imprisoned in concentration camps. Jehovah’s Witnesses, about 20,000 in Germany, were also vigorously persecuted. Many families were broken up, with adults going to prisons and concentration camps, and their children to juvenile detention homes and orphanages.

Almost half of the German Jewish population between 1933 and 1939 left Germany to escape the increasingly difficult and dangerous circumstances. But many countries, including the United States, were unwilling to take in Jewish refugees. In 1938, representatives of twenty-nine countries, including Great Britain,

banning marriage between Jews and non-Jews, and making Jews second-class citizens.

July 19, 1937
Buchenwald (Germany) concentration camp is established.

March 13, 1938
Anschluss: Germany annexes Austria.

July 6–15, 1938
Evian Conference to discuss the problem of Jewish refugees trying to emigrate from the Reich.

August 17, 1938
Compulsory middle names (Sarah for women and Israel for men) for Jews in Germany are required in order to identify them as Jews.

September 29, 1938
The Munich Agreement: England and France accept German annexation of parts of Czechoslovakia.

October 5, 1938
Passports of German Jews are marked with the letter “J.”

November 7–10, 1938
The Kristallnacht Pogrom: About one hundred Jews are murdered and Jewish synagogues and Jewish businesses are burned and vandalized across Germany and Austria.

November 12, 1938
All Jewish businesses are forcibly handed over to Germans; Jews are forbidden from practicing medicine or law or attending universities; a fine of one billion Reichsmarks is imposed on Jews.

November 15, 1938
Jewish children are banned from German schools.

March 15, 1939
Germans occupy Bohemia and Moravia, thus liquidating the Czechoslovak Republic.

Timeline

September 1, 1939
Germany invades Poland, beginning World War II.

September 21, 1939
Reinhard Heydrich (head of security police) orders the establishment of Jewish councils (*Judenrate*) and the concentration of Jews in the larger cities of Poland.

October 4, 1939
The Warsaw (Poland) *Judenrat* is established.

October 7, 1939
Jewish “resettlement” in the Lublin District of Poland begins; plans are made to establish a Jewish “reservation.”

October 8, 1939
The first ghetto is established in Piotrkow Trybunalski, Poland.

October 26, 1939
Polish elite are persecuted and murdered; slave labor is imposed on Jews between the ages of 14–60.

November 23, 1939
Jews in Poland are required to wear the Jewish Badge (Star of David).

December 2, 1939
The Nazis initiate use of gas vans to eliminate patients and mental disabilities.

March 1940
The Katyn Massacre: The Soviets execute thousands of Polish officers in the Soviet-occupied part of Poland.

April 9, 1940
Germany invades Denmark and Norway.

May 10, 1940
Germany invades Belgium and the Netherlands; Chamberlain resigns; Winston Churchill becomes the prime minister of England.

June 14, 1940
Germany occupies Paris; the first deportation of Polish political prisoners to Auschwitz (Poland) concentration camp begins.

United States and France, participated in the Evian Conference to discuss the problem of refugees from Germany. With the exception of the Dominican Republic, no country agreed to raise its quota for immigration.

U.S. delegate Myron Taylor delivers a speech at the Evian Conference on Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany. Evian-les-Bains, France, July 15, 1938.

Photo courtesy National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD.



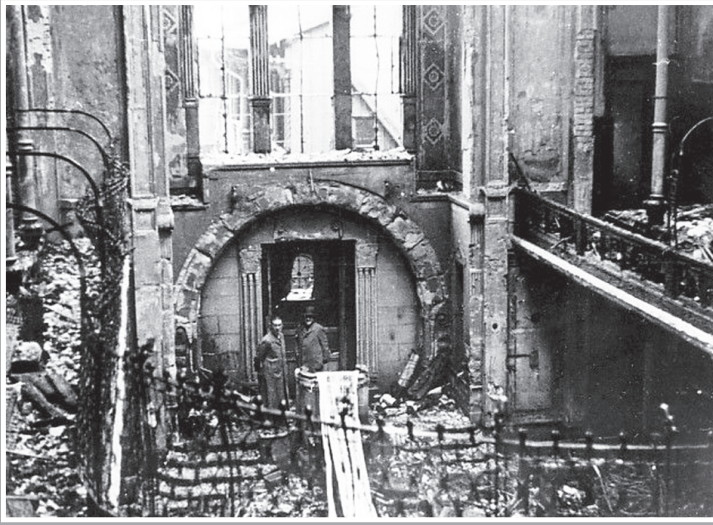
A new level of state-sponsored violence was initiated against the Jewish community, triggered by the following sequence of events. In 1938, 17,000 Jews of Polish citizenship, many of whom had been living in Germany for decades, were arrested and relocated across the Polish border. The Polish government refused to admit them so they were interned in “relocation camps” on the Polish frontier.

Among the deportees was Zindel Grynszpan, was born in western Poland and had moved to Hanover, Germany, where he established a small store in 1911. On the night of October 27, 1938, Grynszpan and his family were forced out of their home by German police. His store and the family’s possessions were confiscated, and they were forced to move over the Polish border.

Grynszpan’s seventeen-year-old son Herschel was living with an uncle in Paris. When he received news of his family’s expulsion, he went to the German embassy in Paris on November 7, intending to assassinate the German Ambassador to France. Upon discovering that the Ambassador was not in the embassy, he shot a low-ranking diplomat, Third Secretary Ernst vom Rath. Rath was critically wounded and died two days later on November 9.

Grynszpan’s attack was interpreted by Joseph Goebbels, Hitler’s Chief of Propaganda, as a direct attack against the Reich and used it as an excuse to launch a pogrom against Jews. This pogrom has come to be called *Kristallnacht*, “Night of Broken Glass.”

On the nights of November 9 and 10, rampaging mobs throughout Germany and the newly acquired territories of Austria and Sudetenland freely attacked Jews in the street, in their homes, and at their places of work and worship. Almost 100 Jews were killed and hundreds more injured; approximately 7,000 Jewish businesses and homes were damaged and looted; 1,400 synagogues were burned; cemeteries and schools were vandalized; and 30,000 Jews were arrested and sent to concentration camps.



Interior of a synagogue in a Jewish religious society in Karlsruhe, Germany after being burnt during *Kristallnacht*.

Photo courtesy of StadtArchiv Pforzheim.

Kristallnacht marked the beginning of the end, the turning point away from a policy bent on forced emigration to one of systematic physical annihilation. The next step was to force Jews from their homes, isolate them in ghettos, and finally deport them to labor and death camps.

When Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, millions of Polish Jews were brought under Nazi rule. The following year, German forces continued their victorious march into much of Europe, taking Denmark, Norway, Holland, Belgium, Luxembourg, and France. In each country the Nazis conquered, Jews were forced to wear a Jewish badge (using the Star of David) in public to be easily identified and were later isolated in ghettos. Conditions in these ghettos were horrendous; thousands died daily of starvation and disease. Still, the process was taking too long to suit the Nazis. By 1941, making Europe “Judenrein,” free of Jews, became a top Nazi priority.



This example of a Jewish badge was worn by Jews in Germany. Jude is the German word for Jew. The badges varied slightly among German-occupied countries where local words for Jew were used (e.g., *Juif* in French, *Jood* in Dutch). Photo courtesy of United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM).

On June 22, 1941, the German army invaded the Soviet Union. The military units were accompanied by Einsatzgruppen, special action groups whose task was to annihilate Jews through mass shootings. As soon as a territory was secured, they would gather its Jews and transport them to a killing site, usually on the edge of town, and proceed to shoot every man, woman, and child. These groups proceeded to kill over two million Jews in the Baltic States, the Ukraine, and Russia. At one site, Babi Yar, a unit assisted by local police shot 33,771 Jews.

For the Nazis, even the mass shootings were not quick or efficient enough. Hitler ordered the construction of six death camps in Poland: Auschwitz-Birkenau, Belżec, Chełmno, Majdanek, Sobibór, and Treblinka. The primary purpose of these camps was to kill as many people as quickly as possible.

Timeline

- November 15, 1940
The Warsaw ghetto is sealed.

- June 6, 1941
“Commissar Order”: Prior to the German invasion of the Soviet Union, the Wehrmacht high command authorizes its soldiers to murder any “suspect” of opposition, mainly Jews and Communists, thereby making the German army involved in war crimes in the occupied territories.

- June 22, 1941
“Operation Barbarossa”: The German invasion of the Soviet Union marks the beginning of the “Final Solution.”

- June 23, 1941
The Einsatzgruppen begin mass killings in the Soviet Union.

- July 31, 1941
Hermann Goering orders Heydrich to plan the “Final Solution.”

- September 3, 1941
The first experimental gassings are conducted at Auschwitz.

- September 19, 1941
German Jews are ordered to wear the Jewish Badge.

- September 29–30, 1941
33,771 Jews are murdered at Babi Yar near Kiev (Ukraine).

- October 8, 1941
The Vitebsk (Belorussia) ghetto is liquidated; Germans murder more than 16,000 Jews.

- October 15, 1941
Deportation of German and Austrian Jews to ghettos in the East begins.

- October 28, 1941
Germans murder thousands of Kovno (Lithuania) Jews.

- October 1941
The first transport (of prisoners of war) reaches Majdanek (Poland) extermination camp.

Timeline

December 7, 1941
The Japanese attack Pearl Harbor; the United States enters World War II; four days later, Germany and Italy declare war on the United States.

December 8, 1941
Gas vans are introduced at Chelmno (Poland) extermination camp.

December 21, 1941
Romanians murder more than 40,000 Jews at the Bogdanovka (Romania) camp.

December 22, 1941
33,500 of 57,000 Jews in Vilna have been murdered.

December 31, 1941
The Jewish underground in Vilna issues a partisan manifesto calling Jews to fight back against the Germans.

January 20, 1942
The Wannsee Conference takes place.

May 1942
The first mass killing in Sobibór (Poland) extermination camp occurs.

July 22, 1942
The mass deportation from the Warsaw ghetto to Treblinka (Poland) extermination camp begins.

July 28, 1942
The Jewish Fighting Organization (Z.O.B.) is founded in Warsaw.

August 10, 1942
Deportations from Lvov to Belzec (Poland) extermination camp begin; 50,000 Jews are gassed.

April 19, 1943
The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising begins.

April 19, 1943
Bermuda Conference: convened by the United States and Great Britain ostensibly to find solutions for wartime refugees.

In January 1942, at a pivotal Nazi meeting in Berlin known as the Wannsee Conference, the decision was made to transport Jews from ghettos all over Europe to be gassed in these death camps. Until the ghettos were completely liquidated, Jews were rounded up and forcibly taken to the local “umschlagplatz” or railway siding. Often people were forced to wait in brutal heat or bitter cold, sometimes for days, for trains to become available. When the trains finally arrived, families were often torn apart as SS guards and policemen shoved them into railroad boxcars designed to transport livestock. The journey, whether for hours or often for days, was made standing, without food, water, or sanitary facilities.

Upon arrival at the camps, the Nazis began their “selections,” sending victims to the right or to the left. Strong, young prisoners were sometimes “lucky” and were kept alive for slave labor. But even most of them eventually succumbed to starvation and disease. For the vast majority of women with children, people who were sick, older adults, and others “of no further use,” death was almost immediate. These people were marched hurriedly to a building containing gas chambers. They were ordered to undress and were then marched naked to a “shower room.” Up to 2,000 people at a time could be accommodated in some of these rooms. The chambers’ massive steel doors were shut and carbon monoxide or Zyklon B (a form of cyanide), came pouring out of the shower nozzles. In a matter of minutes, everyone was dead. Approximately half of all Jews killed in the Holocaust died in the gas chambers of these death camps.

Anti-Semitism and support for Nazism were not limited to Germany and Germans. Non-German paramilitary forces, mobs, and individuals were also responsible for the murder of many of the Jews swept away in the Holocaust. In Romania, the pro-Nazi “Iron Guard” and, in Lithuania, the “Iron Wolf” murdered thousands. Polish and Lithuanian mobs were responsible for killing many Jews. “Hiwis” or Ukrainian auxiliaries that operated under the control of the Germans participated in the liquidation of the ghettos and the subsequent massacres. Thousands were beheaded in Croatian concentration camps by Croatian military units, approximately 20,000 in the Jasnow camp alone.



Bones of anti-Nazi German women still in the crematoriums in the German concentration camp at Weimar (Buchenwald), Germany, taken by the 3rd U.S. Army, April 14, 1945.

Courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD, ARC Identifier #531260.

Timeline

The nations of Western Europe also gave a good deal of help to the Nazis. Pierre Laval, the Premier of Vichy, France, collaborated with the Nazis in the deportation of foreign Jews who had sought refuge in France; nearly 78,000 Jews were placed on trains to death camps. Laval even insisted the trains come back for a few thousand children who had been left behind because of lack of space.

During the winter of 1944–1945, it was clear Germany was losing the war and needed to retreat. The SS decided to evacuate the outlying concentration camps and sent the malnourished and sick prisoners on “death marches.” The Nazis shot or left to die those who could not keep up the endless marching without food, water, adequate clothing, or shoes. Those that made it were badly in need of medical care and provisions. Disease became rampant, and starving, sickly inmates could only wait for allied liberation or death.

Many Jews who were liberated during the spring of 1945 were near death, and many tragically died shortly after liberation. Among those who died just before liberation was Anne Frank, the young Jewish girl whose diary during two years of hiding in Holland is one of the most famous works on the Holocaust. In March of 1945, one month before the British liberated her camp, Anne died of typhus at the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp.

By the time Germany was defeated in May 1945, about two-thirds of Europe’s nine million Jews—including one and a half million children—had perished.

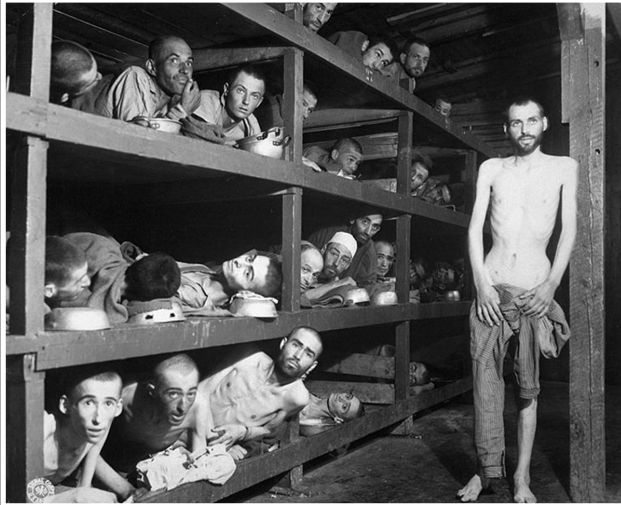
The greatest carnage had taken place in Poland. Of the 3.3 million Polish Jews in 1939, only 20,000 survived the Holocaust. With the exception of Bulgaria, Albania, Denmark, and Italy, death tolls for Jews were extremely high in all regions occupied or controlled by the Germans.

- June 21, 1943
Himmler orders liquidation of all ghettos in occupied Soviet territories.
- August 2, 1943
The uprising at Treblinka begins.
- October 14, 1943
The uprising at Sobibór begins.
- November 3, 1943
Germans launch “Operation Harvest Festival” (*Erntefest*).
- June 6, 1944
D-Day (Invasion of Normandy).
- July 20, 1944
An attempt to assassinate Hitler fails.
- July 22, 1944
Lvov is liberated; 110,000 Jews are dead.
- July 25, 1944
The Soviet Army liberates Majdanek.
- October 7, 1944
The Sonderkommando uprising at Auschwitz-Birkenau begins.
- November 1944
Germans stop gassings at Auschwitz-Birkenau.
- January 27, 1945
The Soviets liberate Auschwitz-Birkenau.
- April 30, 1945
Hitler and Eva Braun commit suicide.
- May 7, 1945
Germany surrenders to the Allies.
- May 8, 1945
Victory in Europe (V-E) Day
- August 6 and 9, 1945
Atomic bombs are dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki (Japan).
- October 18, 1945
The Nuremberg Trials begin.

The timeline provided highlights some of the notable events of the Holocaust. Visit Echoes & Reflections for a comprehensive timeline (<https://echoesandreflections.org/timeline/>).

Liberation

When the Allied armies finally crushed Hitler's legions, the evidence of Nazi atrocities emerged everywhere.



Slave laborers in the Buchenwald concentration camp near Jena. Many had died from malnutrition when U.S. troops of the 80th Division entered the camp. Second row, seventh from left is Elie Wiesel, author of *Night*, an account of the Nazi death camp and his agonized witness to the death of his family. Photo courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD ARC #535561.



Margaret Bourke-White's photograph of the "living dead of Buchenwald," April 13, 1945. Concentration survivors liberated by American forces. © Time & Life Pictures/ Getty Images.



Starved prisoners, nearly dead from hunger, pose in concentration camp in Ebensee, Austria. The camp was reputedly used for "scientific" experiments. It was liberated by the 80th Division. Photo courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD ARC #531271.



Child survivors of Auschwitz. They were liberated from the Auschwitz concentration camp by the Red Army January, 1945. Photo from USHMM, courtesy of Belarussian State Archive of Documentary Film and Photography.