

Unit Title: **The Final Solution: The Transition to Mass Murder/Genocide****Holocaust Education - Historical Notes and Teaching Suggestions for Educators:**

The “Final Solution to the Jewish Question” was the euphemistic name the Nazis used to describe their program of mass murder directed against the Jews of Europe. The main problem with this phrase is that its vagueness obscures the enormity and brutality of the crime. This was intentional, as it allowed the perpetrators to discuss it without having to continually confront its true nature. It also allowed them to maintain a degree of obfuscation in their conversations, speeches, letters, and documents. They also used phrases such as “appropriate treatment”, “special handling”, “resettlement”, and “evacuation” in the same way. The corruption of language with the intent to deceive was part of the Nazis’ strategy. There is one way, though, in which the words “Final Solution” were clear and appropriate. The Nazis’ did not consider their earlier actions against the Jews to be far-reaching enough to be “final”. Step by step, over the course of eight and a half years, through vastly changing circumstances, Hitler and the Nazi leadership arrived at the decision to commit genocide. How and why did they make this decision? How did they convince people to participate (or did they even have to try)? How many people were involved? As you engage these crucial questions in your classroom, help students keep the following points in mind:

1. Hitler and the Nazis frequently talked about “solving the Jewish question”, but what they meant by these words changed over time. Progressively, some of the “solutions” were:

- Slandering Jews through propaganda to stigmatize them as a pariah group, marking them as different and separate from the “Aryan” Germans. The Nazis could attack Jews in this way even before they gained power.
- Curtailing the role of Jews in German society through social, political, and economic discrimination.
- Denial of citizenship and civil rights.
- Segregation from the larger community.
- Targeted violence, confiscation of property, and coerced emigration.

With the conquest of Poland, it became possible to exile Jews, though they would still remain within the German sphere of influence. The Nazis considered a sort of “reservation” for Jews, first on the island of Madagascar, then in the Lublin area of Poland or in a region of the soon to be conquered Soviet Union. The policy of enclosing Jews within restricted ghettos probably began with such relocations in mind and would have been temporary holding areas to facilitate the process. It was not possible to accomplish these relocations in the short term, though, so the ghettos continued to exist for a longer period. They quickly became so overcrowded and ill-equipped that mass death was the only possible result. (For example, approximately 100,000 Jews died in the Warsaw ghetto between 1940 and 1943.) Faced with the consequences of their own contemptuous attitudes and destructive policies (i.e. Jews were dying in large numbers due to the harshness of the conditions imposed on them.), it was a logical next step for the Nazis to kill the Jews directly, especially when the practical possibilities for the territorial solution began to recede.

2. Many people mistakenly believe that the mass murder of Europe’s Jews took place within the pre-war borders of Germany. In reality, the Nazis decided to implement the “Final Solution” in the occupied territories to the east of Germany (mostly in Poland, the Baltic States, and the western Soviet Union). There were several reasons for this decision:

- The great majority of Jews lived in this geographic region. There were over ten times more Jews living in this area than had been living within Germany in 1933. There would be fewer logistical problems carrying out killings near the places where most of the Jews lived.
- It would be easier to conceal the evidence of a killing program in the occupied territories than it would be in Germany itself. The first Nazi murder program was carried out within Germany against certain handicapped people. It utilized gas chamber executions in selected hospitals. The Nazis were unable to maintain secrecy and eventually faced some opposition. They officially ended the program, although murders continued unofficially using other methods.

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- There was a stronger and more recent history of violent antisemitism in this region. There had been many pogroms and killings in the previous sixty years. Jews were generally less assimilated here than in Western Europe. The Nazis would also be able to use this to their advantage.

3. The “Final Solution” was carried out under the cover of war. Unfortunately, war tends to diminish humane considerations regarding the value of life, but in this case it was even worse. Hitler had ordered his officers in the east not to follow the normal rules of war concerning the treatment of civilians and prisoners of war. Thus, the murder of Jews was carried out against the backdrop of an already brutal occupation and ruthless exploitation of conquered territories. This most likely desensitized some of the people who might otherwise have opposed what was occurring.

4. There is a natural degree of uncertainty surrounding the question of how many people knew about, approved of, or cooperated with the mass murder program. Of course, there were varying degrees of knowledge and cooperation. The Nazis didn’t inform people about the details of the killing program unless they had a direct need to know. The killers themselves were sworn to secrecy, though many violated this oath. Even so, an activity of this sort and scope was impossible to keep secret. Even the Allies had reliable information about the killings shortly after their commencement. Certainly, most people knew something (and many knew a great deal) about what was going on. Many cooperated with the Nazis to greater or lesser degrees. Many acquiesced to the reality of the events, but considered themselves to be uninvolved because they weren’t active participants. Few took active measures to try to help the victims. These observations apply to individuals living in the occupied territories as well as to members of the German Army and to the German civilian population on the home front. It is impossible to characterize the actions of any group with sweeping generalizations and we should avoid stereotypes at all costs. Nevertheless, it is highly unlikely that there were many people who knew nothing about the persecutions and murder carried out by the Nazis.

5. Regarding the question of responsibility for the crimes, it should be noted that responsibility exists at the individual level, but also at institutional and societal levels as well.

6. There is little evidence that the Nazis forced people into killing Jews. There is reliable evidence that they allowed men who were unwilling to serve in the firing squads of the Einsatzgruppen to request transfers or assignment to other duty. These men were not punished. The Nazis didn’t need reluctant participants when they had eager volunteers waiting to take their places. A few thousand people carried out the actual killings, but many thousands more provided vital support in areas such as administration, technical services, transportation, supply, etc. The “Final Solution” was not a covert operation that was carried out by a cabal of secret operatives. It was a central act of the German state implemented with the integration of officials from every part of the government bureaucracy and including key participation from the private sector as well.

7. The Nazis used tactics in their attacks against Jews that made resistance difficult. Some of these were:

- Deception: The Nazis used misleading language and direct lies to disguise their intentions. In this way they kept the Jews off guard and hampered both Jewish and non-Jewish resistance efforts.
- Terror: The threat and use of arbitrary, extreme physical violence had a paralyzing impact on victims.
- Separation of family members: People who still had the hope of being reunited with their families at a later time might refrain from engaging in risky resistance activities.
- Collective Responsibility: The Nazis used the sympathy that the victims felt for one another as a tool to control them. Any act of resistance carried the threat of massive reprisals against entire groups.
- Starvation and other deprivations (such as the lack of medicine, heating fuels, and sanitation) weakened the ability of people to physically resist.
- Slave labor: The Nazis deceived people into believing that workers would be saved from deportation and ultimately murder. In reality, the final fate of slave laborers was only postponed. At the Wannsee Conference, Reinhard Heydrich recognized destruction through labor as one method to be used in the murder of Jews. In

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other words, some people were intentionally worked to death as a part of the “Final Solution”. It should be noted that there was a degree of disagreement among Nazi leaders regarding Jewish slave labor. Some wanted to emphasize its productive capacity, while others (particularly Himmler and the SS) wanted to use it also as a method of destruction. The SS position usually prevailed, but there were some exceptions. Even in these cases, Jewish laborers were rarely treated humanely.

In spite of all the obstacles, Jews managed to continue to live, to help each other, and even to fight back against the Nazis in many ways. The next unit in this guide deals with Jewish resistance.

8. Even after the Nazis began to implement the “Final Solution”, they continued to experiment with ways to make the process more efficient.

- The mass murder program began with the invasion of the Soviet Union, utilizing four mobile firing squad units known as *Einsatzgruppen*. Several problems emerged from the use of this method. Mass shootings were inefficient, gruesome, and difficult to keep hidden. They were also considered to be too stressful on the killers. Approximately 1 – 1.5 million people were murdered in this way.
- In response to the problems with shooting, the SS leadership decided to rely primarily on poison gas. They began by using mobile gassing vans, then established “Death Camps” in locations chosen for their suitability to this purpose. The Nazis carried out large-scale executions by poison gas at Chelmno (using gas vans), Auschwitz-Birkenau, Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka, and Majdanek. Shooting was never entirely abandoned, however.