



Paul R. Bartrop

The Holocaust

the basics

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THE HOLOCAUST

THE BASICS

The Holocaust: The Basics is a concise introduction to the study of this seismic event in mid twentieth-century human history.

The book takes an original approach as both a narrative and thematic introduction to the topic, and provides a core foundation for readers embarking upon their own study. It examines a range of perspectives and subjects surrounding the Holocaust, including:

- the perpetrators of the Holocaust
- the victims
- resistance to the Holocaust
- liberation
- legacies and survivors' memories of the Holocaust.

Supported by a chronology, glossary, questions for discussion, and boxed case studies that focus the reader's thoughts and develop their appreciation of the subjects considered more broadly, *The Holocaust: The Basics* is the ideal introduction to this controversial and widely debated topic for both students and the more general reader.

Paul R. Bartrop is Professor of History and Director of the Center for Judaic, Holocaust, and Genocide Studies at Florida Gulf Coast University, Fort Myers, USA. He is the author or editor of over twenty books, including the Routledge titles *Genocide: The Basics* (2015); *Fifty Key Thinkers on the Holocaust and Genocide* (2011); and *The Genocide Studies Reader* (2009).

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THE BASICS

Paul R. Bartrop

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PREFACE

The Holocaust—the attempt by the Nazi regime of Germany to remove and then exterminate the Jews of Europe between 1933 and 1945—is arguably one of the most discussed topics of recent history. Writing about it is a massive assignment in view of the need for precision and, at the same time, comprehension. My hope is that in this short book I have been successful in managing to contextualize and explain the major contours of that terrible event.

The book is intended as a teaching tool as well as a volume to be read by a general audience—though much, it must be said, makes for depressing reading given its subject matter. Yet in addition to the horrors being recounted, there are stories of inspiration here as well, as we read of those who stood up to the Nazis and worked to thwart their destructive aims.

In seeking to provide a comprehensive introduction to the multifaceted phenomenon that was the Holocaust, I have been accompanied by the questions posed by my many students, in several institutions and levels on two continents, over the past three decades. The chapters in this book are a mirror of their concerns, and, I hope, will resonate with readers today.

There are two people to whom I must proffer my humble gratitude for their assistance in putting this small volume together. Each read every word in draft form, and each made valuable suggestions which enhanced the whole project in many ways. Michael Dickerman, with whom I had worked earlier on a major Holocaust encyclopedia project, brought his extraordinary editorial skills to the task, showing me along the way that his talents are many, varied, and immensely valuable.

Eve E. Grimm, with whom I have also published on aspects of the Holocaust, kept my writing honest and insisted that this was a project to which I could bring new understandings despite my own reservations.

A further vote of thanks is due to my publisher at Routledge, Dr. Eve Setch, who has been an exceptional guide from the time this project was first suggested as a complement to my earlier *Genocide: The Basics*. I have been blessed in being able to work with such a consummate and highly skilled professional. I also want to thank her assistant, Zoe Thomson, with whom I have just started working.

Writing a book of this length, on such a massive topic, has presented one major problem, which must be addressed here by way of a disclaimer; given the relative sizes of both the volume and the subject, there were only a limited number of areas it could cover. I have often found myself frustrated at not being able to introduce (much less develop) certain themes which, I am sure, some will say should have been explored here. With that in mind, I will only say this: the book you have in your hand is an introduction only, and makes no pretense at being the last word. Accordingly, I urge anyone holding it to go out and extend its boundaries—and do it now. It's never too late to make a better world.

Paul R. Bartrop
Fort Myers, Florida

INTRODUCTION

Defining the Holocaust

When looking at the Holocaust it is always advisable, as survivor Elie Wiesel has told us, to begin with tales. As he wrote in an essay as long ago as 1976:

Let us tell tales. Let us tell tales—all the rest can wait, all the rest must wait.

Let us tell tales—that is our primary obligation. Commentaries will have to come later, lest they replace or becloud what they mean to reveal.

Tales of children so wise and so old. Tales of old men mute with fear. Tales of victims welcoming death as an old acquaintance. Tales that bring man close to the abyss and beyond—and others that lift him up to heaven and beyond. Tales of despair, tales of longing. Tales of immense flames reaching out to the sky, tales of night consuming life and hope and eternity.

Let us tell tales so as to remember how vulnerable man is when faced with overwhelming evil. Let us tell tales so as not to allow the executioner to have the last word. The last word belongs to the victim. It is up to the witness to capture it, shape it, transmit it and keep it as a secret, and then communicate that secret to others.

(1976: 258)

The tale with which we can begin here relates to one of the greatest of Jewish historians, the Russian-born Jewish scholar Simon Dubnow. His is not a survivor's story.

During the World War II, the elderly Dubnow was living in Riga, Latvia. Given the opportunity to escape the fearsome potential that a German invasion might bring, he decided to remain where he was, determined not to flee and in so doing hand the Nazis a victory. A number of witnesses to his death were later to provide the following record of his last moments:

When the Nazis entered Riga they evicted Dubnow from his home and seized his entire library. They summoned him for questioning at Gestapo headquarters and then placed him in a home for the aged. After a short period of ghetto organization the Nazis liquidated the ghetto at the end of October 1941 and a month later they carried out their first “action” against the Riga Jews. Dubnow was seriously ill, but friends managed to conceal him for a while. On the night of December 7–8 the Nazis carried out their second “action.” All the old and sick as well as the women in advanced pregnancy were herded together in buses. Dubnow was also taken outside to be squeezed into one of these overloaded buses. He was in a high fever at the time and was hardly able to move his feeble legs. A Latvian militiaman then advanced and fired a bullet in Dubnow’s back and the sainted martyr fell dead on the spot. The next day several friends buried him in the old cemetery in the Riga ghetto. A story went round that the last words that Dubnow muttered as he was being led out to the bus were: “Brothers, don’t forget! Recount what you hear and see! Brothers, make a record of it all!”

(Pinson, 1970: 39)

This is the kind of story with which most survivors of the Holocaust could readily identify. All are driven by Dubnow’s exhortation to remember and recount, and in doing so, to bear witness.

How are we to approach the enormous topic that is the Nazi Holocaust of the Jewish people? It negated every positive achievement of the twentieth century, a genocidal explosion that saw a sudden and irrevocable break with all the humanistic traditions that had been developing in Europe over the previous thousand years. The relationship between mass death and the industrial state

that became manifested in the Holocaust was intimate, and as a result of it having taken place we forever have a yardstick by which all other cases of genocide must be measured. Its message is so powerful that no definition of Western civilization can ever again be constructed without reference being made to where the corruption of that civilization can lead.

The period of National Socialist rule across Europe was a time of immense upheaval, occasioned by deliberate and massive political violence. At first confined to Germany, it then spread to Austria, Czechoslovakia, and, eventually, to most of Europe. Its brutality was, until 1938, almost exclusively directed against political opponents, but by the end of the 1930s it began targeting Jews solely because of their Jewish identity.

The SS, the Nazi organization responsible for planning and executing the antisemitic measures, sought the elimination of those who it considered posed a threat through their very existence. This would be a genocidal struggle, forming part of a much broader campaign that also intended to destroy communism, wipe out the free-thinking opposition, and (after the onset of war) reduce the status of the population in the occupied areas (particularly in Eastern Europe) to that of ignorant and impotent vassals or serfs.

For the Nazis' aims to be realized, their leader, Adolf Hitler, needed the expertise of professionals capable of organizing the murder of vast numbers of people, as well as a bureaucracy comprised of men and women capable of implementing it. Hitler was able to call on the experts responsible for his ambitious pre-war eugenics scheme, which had seen the death of scores of thousands of so-called "defective" humans—Germans whom the Nazis referred to as having "life unworthy of life" with congenital illnesses, psychological problems, crippling injuries, or physical deformities, among other features distinguishing them from supposedly "normal" people. The experts responsible for killing these people had developed both the techniques and the mindset necessary for murdering large numbers of human beings. Adapting what they had already been doing to the much larger tasks required in Eastern Europe seemed, for many, to be a natural progression.

By 1941 the primary objective of Nazism had become the physical elimination of all of Europe's Jews. As one survivor of Auschwitz, Fania Fénelon, was later to recall, "The behavior of

the SS was ruled by the terrible phrase: ‘Woe to those who forget that everything that resembles a human being is not necessarily a human being’” (1977: 97–98).

The war ended in 1945, and the world that had been fought for by the democracies had been saved. With Nazism destroyed, optimism for the future was high. This excitement would be short-lived as the Cold War developed, but there was reason to hope that the postwar world would bring with it the realization of all liberal democracy’s best ideals. One of several measures to bring this about, adopted by the newly established United Nations in 1948, was international legislation to prevent and punish the crime of genocide.

At that time there seemed to be no difficulty for people to identify it for what it was. A vast number of Europeans, in particular, already instinctively knew about genocide, even if the name was not yet in broad usage. In Allied capitals around the world, reports through both official channels and the media had already been conveying for some time the realities of the Nazi Holocaust, as evidence of the worst expressions of inhumanity was uncovered by liberating forces.

The genocidal nature of the Nazi regime is now such an established fact that it would not seem to require further elaboration. It was, it might be argued, the paradigmatic genocide (Garber, 1994). The perpetrators of the Holocaust had but one aim in mind: the complete removal of all Jews falling under their rule. An alteration of status through religious conversion or naturalization would not change their fate; in the Nazi view, every Jew, by virtue of his or her very birth, “was the static expression of Evil ... a natural-born, predestined, non-assimilable heretic, doomed to Apocalyptic hell-fire” (Rousset, 1951). The fate of the Jews was planned as a total annihilation, from which none would be allowed to escape. The Nazis intended nothing less than the physical destruction, through murder, of every Jew who fell into their net.

One of the questions often asked about the Holocaust, given its enormity, is whether or not it was unique within the annals of history (Rosenbaum, 2018). This, perhaps, is the wrong question. All historical phenomena are unique in that they will never again occur in exactly the same way or according to the time-and-place circumstances in which the original event happened. Every

genocidal act of the past century, from the Hereros to the Armenians to the Ukrainians, from East Timor to Burundi to Cambodia to Rwanda to Bosnia to Darfur, has been characterized by specific developments which cannot be transferred from one setting to another—if only for the reason that human affairs do not act that way. The best that objective historians can hope to identify is the features that are common or different, and from this ascertain whether some sort of general pattern can be discerned.

As all cases of genocide have elements that are indeed unique unto themselves, the key question about the Holocaust should not be “was it unique?,” but rather, turning the issue upside down, ask “what *was* unique about it?”—in other words, to assume its uniqueness and thereafter move straight on to identifying the feature or features that define its specific character.

To develop this discussion, we can take one aspect of the Holocaust—probably the most important of them all—the massive killing and destruction the Nazis inflicted on the Jews of Europe. The means they employed to achieve their murderous aims, especially from early 1942 onwards, was of course the death (or extermination) camp (*Vernichtungslager*), and it is this institution, thoroughly unprecedented in purpose and design, that is arguably the starkest feature of the Holocaust from 1942 onwards (Wachsmann, 2015).

Nothing, either before or since, approximates the Nazi death camps in design, intention, or operation. Nowhere have any other regimes producing malevolent concentration camps introduced establishments like these, in particular the “Operation Reinhard” death camps of Treblinka, Bełżec, and Sobibór. They were, and remain, thoroughly unprecedented in human history (Arad, 1987).

The period of National Socialist rule in Europe was a time of immense upheaval and dislocation, occasioned by deliberate and massive political violence. Its most extreme brief was to wage a genocidal struggle against the Jews, which, under the direction of Heinrich Himmler and Reinhard Heydrich, the SS undertook with what can best be described as a religious zeal. A vast array of different types of concentration camps evolved, with at least forty-three different categories existing at the height of the Nazis’ power.

All of these institutions, whether concentration or extermination camps, were places of unmitigated horror, where life was characterized by “hard work, poor diet, over-crowded and unsanitary living conditions, and SS cruelty” (Edelheit and Edelheit, 1994: 67). Death by beating, bullets, or other means lurked around every corner. Throughout the war years, disease and starvation were constant companions. Deprived of all rights, ordinary inmates were subjected to the caprice of Nazi guards and the other prisoners placed in positions of authority over them.

The six death camps located in Poland—Auschwitz-Birkenau, Belżec, Chełmno, Majdanek, Sobibór, and Treblinka—transformed the nature and course of Nazi concentration camp development. They were a departure from anything previously visualized in both their design and character, planned to methodically and efficiently murder millions of people, specifically Jews. They became the most lucid and unequivocal statement National Socialism made about itself, demonstrating beyond doubt that it was an anti-human ideology in which respect for life counted for nothing.

An understanding of the concentration and death camp system can add to our knowledge of Nazism in two important ways. First, it shows how a regime dedicated to mass murder mobilized all its resources for the purpose of feeding the demands of an industry that had been deliberately assigned the tasks of incarceration, degradation, and annihilation. Second, the history and fate of the camps demonstrates that the regime was aware that its activities were of a criminal and morally repugnant nature. After all, the Nazis chose to carry out their murderous assignments in places far removed from key population centers, accompanied by an exhaustive effort to destroy as much evidence of the killing as possible prior to being overrun by the advancing Allied forces. Put together, these aspects of what the death camps represented added up to a new dimension of inhumanity.

Millions of people suffered and died as a direct result of Nazi actions during World War II, but only the Jews were murdered because of the “crime” of their very existence (Berkowitz, 2007). Only the Jews were intended for total, complete, and utter annihilation, in which they would become extinct as a people. Why, therefore, does the Holocaust still matter? Because ignorance will triumph, and hatred, intolerance, bigotry, discrimination and

thuggery will again become fashionable if it is forgotten. The passions unleashed against the Jewish people between 1933 and 1945 are the same kind that are still being unleashed against others, today. In our own self-interest, we must remember what happened, and take careful note, because, it might be argued, we dare not forget.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- When speaking about the “Holocaust,” what time period are we referring to?
- Why were the Jews singled out for extermination?
- What were the distinctive features of the Holocaust?
- Is it possible to define the Holocaust without reference to the Nazi campaign of annihilation against the Jews of Europe? Why/Why not?

OUTLINES, ORIGINS, AND CONSEQUENCES

OVERVIEW

The Holocaust is the term in English most closely identified with the attempt by Germany's National Socialist regime, in conjunction with its European allies, to exterminate the Jews of Europe during the period of World War II—particularly during its most destructive phase between 1941 and 1944. While an exact number of those murdered is impossible to determine, the best estimates settle at a figure approximating around six million Jews, one million of whom were children under the age of 12, and another half million of whom were aged between 13 and 18 (Laqueur, 2001).

The term “Holocaust” is most commonly used to describe the event, but two other terms are also employed, particularly within the Jewish world. The Hebrew word *Churban*, or “catastrophe,” which historically has been employed to describe the destruction of the two Temples in Jerusalem, is one of these; the other, utilized increasingly, is the Hebrew term *Shoah* (“calamity,” or, sometimes, “destruction”).

The first step on the road to the Holocaust took place on the night of February 27–28, 1933, when the Reichstag building in Berlin, the home of the German parliament, was deliberately set on fire. Who was responsible for the arson has long been a matter of dispute (Hett, 2014), but the next day, on the pretext that it had been set by communists and that a left-wing revolution was imminent, newly appointed Chancellor Adolf Hitler prevailed upon President Paul von Hindenburg to sign an emergency

proclamation entitled the Decree for the Protection of the People and the State. It suspended all the basic civil and individual liberties guaranteed under the Weimar Constitution, empowering the government to take such steps as necessary to ensure that what was touted as a threat to German society was removed. In the first few days hundreds were detained, with tens of thousands more in succeeding weeks.

Then, on March 20, 1933, *Reichsführer*-SS Heinrich Himmler announced the establishment of the first compound for political prisoners, about 15 kilometers northwest of Munich, on the outskirts of the town of Dachau (Dillon, 2015). Other camps soon followed, among them Oranienburg, Papenburg, Esterwegen, Kemna, Lichtenburg, and Börgermoor (Wachsmann, 2015).

These camps were originally places of political imprisonment, and were nicknamed “Wilde-KZ” (“wild concentration camps”), alluding to the fact that they sprang up like wildflowers after refreshing rain following a long period of drought. There was little in the way of planning or procedure, and the camps frequently operated without any apparent system or direction. Often, the very location of these places was impromptu. Dachau was a former gunpowder factory; Oranienburg was originally a brewery (and later, a foundry); and Börgermoor and Esterwegen were initially simply rows of barracks set down on open expanses of marshy heathland. In other camps, prisoners had to build their own housing, and started their camp life living in tents.

It is important to note that these camps were originally places for political prisoners. Captives were selected by using political criteria, the intention being to isolate political opposition and frighten the population into accepting Nazi rule—the regime itself viewed the incarceration of communists and related enemies as a form of punishment which by necessity had to be imposed on these political “criminals.” Opponents, whether real, presumed, or potential, would be scared into submission (Sofsky, 1997). The only thing the Nazis demanded was political compliance. In their most basic sense the camps removed political opposition from the midst of the community, and intimidated the population into accepting the Nazi regime.

Initially Jews had been arrested for “transgressing” within the framework of the existing political classifications, but from 1935

onwards they were frequently being victimized for their Jewishness alone (Wünschmann, 2015). This was brought about by the so-called Nuremberg Laws on Citizenship and Race, which defined and put into practice the formal status of Jews in the Nazi state, and by which Jews were increasingly excluded from participation in all forms of German life. Jewish businesses were boycotted, Jewish doctors excluded from public hospitals and only permitted to practice on other Jews, Jewish judicial figures were dismissed and disbarred, Jewish professors were removed from their teaching posts and their Jewish students were expelled from universities. The Nuremberg Laws also withdrew from Jews the privilege of German citizenship. It became illegal for a Jew and a non-Jew to marry or engage in sexual relations. In short, life was to be made so intolerable that Jews would seek to emigrate; men who did not often found themselves arbitrarily arrested and sent to concentration camps. These arrests did not become widespread until 1938, and in most cases the victims were only held for a short time. The aim was to terrorize them into leaving the country (Schleunes, 1970).

The first large-scale arrests of Jews were made on and after the night of November 9–10, 1938, as “reprisals” for the assassination of consular official Ernst vom Rath by Jewish student Herschel Grynszpan in Paris a few days earlier. The event precipitating these arrests has gone down in history through use of the Nazi term for the episode, *Kristallnacht*, the “Night of Broken Glass” (Gilbert, 2007b). The resultant rampage was portrayed as a righteous and spontaneous outpouring of anger by ordinary German people against all Jews, even though for the most part it was Nazis in plain clothes who whipped up most of the action in the streets. The pogrom resulted in greater concentrated destruction than any previous anti-Jewish measure under the Nazis. By their own figures, 91 Jews had been killed and over 30,000 arrested and taken into “protective custody” (*Schutzhaft*) in concentration camps and prisons. Over 267 synagogues and 7,000 Jewish businesses were either destroyed or damaged. The real figures for all the destruction and lives lost were almost certainly higher, as many of the excesses went unrecorded. As a further insult, Nazi leader Hermann Göring ordered that the Jewish community be fined one billion Reichsmarks for the murder of vom

Rath, and a further six million Reichsmarks in insurance payments were to be paid to the government for “damages” to the German state (Thalmann and Feinermann, 1974). Jews who had up to now thought the regime was a passing phenomenon realized that this was not the case; tens of thousands now began looking for ways to leave Germany, by any means possible.

After *Kristallnacht*, within Germany Jews were targeted for the sole reason of their Jewishness: beforehand, Nazi persecution was not premised on acts of wanton destruction or murder, but the November pogrom had the effect of transforming earlier legislative measures against Jews into physical harassment on a broader and more indiscriminate scale than ever before. From then on, physical acts of an antisemitic nature became state policy. While Germany’s Jews began frantically seeking sanctuaries to which they could emigrate in order to save their lives, the Free World began to close its doors to Jewish immigration (Dwork and van Pelt, 2009). Further, with Hitler’s foreign policy appetite growing and new areas becoming annexed to the Third Reich (that is, Austria, the Sudetenland, “rump” Czechoslovakia, and Memel), the number of Jews coming under Nazi control increased to less manageable proportions.

The outbreak of war on September 1, 1939, saw the establishment of a system of ghettos in occupied Poland from October 1939 onwards, in order to segregate and confine Poland’s Jewish population. Here, they were persecuted and terrorized, starved, and deprived of all medical care.

During the Nazi assault on the Soviet Union beginning in June 1941, mobile killing squads known as *Einsatzgruppen* (“Special Action Groups”), accompanying the German military, had been at work murdering all Jews found within their areas of command and control. The initial means by which they operated was to round up their captive Jewish populations—men, women, and children—take them outside of village and town areas, force the victims to dig their own mass graves, and then shoot them. When the repetition of that activity proved psychologically troublesome, mobile gas vans using carbon monoxide poisoning were brought in both to remove the intimacy of contact and sanitize the process. While at times technologically inefficient, from an economic perspective it was cost-effective in the use of both

men and *materiél*. It is estimated that between 1941 and 1943 the *Einsatzgruppen* were responsible for the death of more than one million Jews (Rhodes, 2002; Desbois, 2008).

It is not known precisely when the decision to exterminate the Jews of Europe was made, though best estimates settle on sometime in the late summer or early fall of 1941 (Browning, 2004). At a conference held at Wannsee, Berlin, on January 20, 1942, the process was systematized and coordinated among Nazi Germany's relevant government departments (Roseman, 2002), and in the following months the Nazis established several camps in Poland for the express purpose of killing much larger numbers. From the summer of 1942 onwards the ghettos began to be liquidated, with the Jews sent to one of six death camps located throughout Poland. These six camps—Auschwitz-Birkenau, Bełżec, Chełmno, Majdanek, Sobibór and Treblinka—were a departure from anything previously visualized, in both their design and character. With the exception only of Auschwitz (which served simultaneously as a death camp, concentration camp, and labor camp complex), they were different from all others in that they did not perform any of the functions—political, industrial, agricultural, or penal—attributed to those further west or north. These were the *Vernichtungslager*, the death (or extermination) camps (see Box 2.1).

BOX 2.1 A CHILD'S EXPERIENCE: SHIRLEY BERGER GOTTESMAN

In April 1944 Shirley Berger Gottesman, a 16-year-old girl from Záluž, in Transcarpathian Poland/Ukraine, was deported to a ghetto in nearby Munkács, Hungary, along with her parents and four siblings. Soon after, they were sent to Auschwitz. Just a few hundred yards from the gas chambers and crematoria at Birkenau was an area of the camp the inmates called *Kanada*. Comprised of thirty barrack blocks transformed into storehouses northwest of the Auschwitz main camp, this nickname was given because the Poles in the camp saw the country of Canada as a land of great plenty and riches. In the barracks, inmates sorted and packaged new arrivals'