Essential Vocabulary for Holocaust Study

Antisemitism: Prejudice against or hatred of Jews. Antisemitism was not a Nazi construct, feelings of hatred towards Jews had existed for centuries.

Aryan: The term used by the Nazis to describe Northern European characteristics that are racially superior. These characteristics of blonde hair and blue eyes were the ideal features for an Aryan.

Assimilate: A cultural minority adopts the dominant culture in areas such as clothing, traditions/holidays, language, and food.

Bystander: People who were passive and indifferent to the escalating persecution.

Collaborator: Actively participated in the murder of Jews, and in several cases committed atrocities against their Jewish fellow citizens within their own national borders.

Concentration Camp: A camp in which civilians are detained or confined, usually under harsh conditions and without regard to legal norms of arrest and imprisonment that are acceptable in a constitutional democracy. Thousands of camps operated throughout Nazi Germany controlled Europe by the of World War II.

Death Camp: A concentration camp which sole purpose was to kill people. The six camps run by the Nazis which operated as death camps were Sobibor, Treblinka, Chemno, Belzec, Auschwitz, and Majdanek. These camps run in an “assembly line” as victims were herded into gas chambers where they were murdered. Their bodies were burned in crematoria or in open fields or buried in graves.

Death March: Forced marches of concentration camp prisoners from the camps to the interior of Nazi controlled Europe. These marches took place over long distances where prisoners were under constant guard by Nazi soldiers who treated these prisoners with extreme brutality.

Dehumanization: Process of changing how a group or a person is perceived. Dehumanization reduces the group or person to objects making them no longer human and not subject of human rights. This was done by referring to a person or group as animals such as “pigs” or insects such as “cockroaches” or parasites.

Democracy: A form of government in which people choose leaders by voting.

Deportation: Forcing a person to leave where they are living. In context of the Holocaust, the Nazis would trick, coerce, and force prisoners to leave the ghettos board railway cars where they would be sent to concentration or death camps. Those in these railway cars were subject to overcrowding, unsanitary conditions, with no food or water for days. Many died as a result.

Dictator: a person who rules a country with total authority and often in a cruel or brutal way.

Discrimination: The unjust or prejudicial treatment of different categories of people or things, especially on the grounds of race, age, or sex.

Displaced Persons: in the aftermath of the Holocaust and World War II, more than 250,000 Jewish peoples lived in camps maintained by the Allied authorities and Unied Nations from 1945-1952. Many did not (or felt they could not) have homes to return to after Liberation.

Einsatzgruppen: Mobile killing units that followed the German Army on the Eastern front. These squads would round up Jewish residents and execute them into mass graves. At least one million Jews were killed by these mobile killing squads.

Emancipation: The process of being set free from legal, social, or political restrictions; liberation.

Emigration: The act of leaving one’s country to settle in another country.

Eugenics: or “racial hygiene,” was a scientific movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The belief of eugenics was that humanity could be improved by removing unhealthy or undesirable elements from the genetic pool. The United States during the early 20th century embraced eugenics as forced sterilization of the handicapped was common. Hitler and the Nazi party took this a step further by euthanizing the physically or mentally handicapped.

Euthanasia: refers to causing a painless death for a chronically or terminally ill individual who would otherwise suffer.

Evian Conference: an international conference convened by U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt in the summer of 1938 at a French summer resort in Evian-les-Bains, France. Delegates from 32 countries discussed the growing refugee problem. Many western countries expressed sympathy with the refugees but only one country, the Dominican Republic, agreed to accept additional refugees. Hitler interpreted the outcome of this conference as a message that foreign countries did not care about Jews.

Expulsion: To be required or forced to leave a place.

Fascism: A far-right political philosophy, or theory of government, that emerged in the early twentieth century.

Final Solution: The term adopted at the Wansee Conference in 1942 used to describe the murder of European Jews.

Forced Labor: Often pointless and humiliating, and imposed without proper equipment, clothing, nourishment, or rest.

Genocide: systematic annihilation of a targeted racial, religious, cultural, or political group. The term “genocide” comes from a combination of Greek and Latin words. The Greek word *Geno*, for race or tribe and *-cide*, Latin word for killing. Termed by the Polish-Jewish lawyer Raphael Lemkin to describe the Holocaust. In 1948, genocide was approved by the United Nations as an international crime. Genocide, however, has happened in the years following the Holocaust such as in Cambodia (1975-1979), Bosnia (1995), Rwanda (1994), Sudan (2003-2009) and Syria (2011-2019).

Gestapo: Nazi secret police, the *Geheimstaatspolizei*, was established by Herman Goring and later headed by Heinrich Himmler to combat criminal actions against the Nazi regime. The Gestapo was allowed to operate outside the law.

Ghetto: often enclosed districts that isolated Jews by separating Jewish communities from the non-Jewish population by the use of wooden fences and barbed wire. These ghettos were overcrowded with extreme conditions that hastened the deaths of many of the population located within. With the development of the Final Solution, the ghettos were liquidated and the populace were either shot in mass graves or deported to concentration camps and/or death camps.

Gypsies: This term is a misnomer and should not be used to describe the Romani and Sinti cultural group, an often stateless (without citizenship), nomadic people who traveled around Europe. Romani people were often subject to persecution in Western Europe. At least 500,000 Romani died during the course of the Holocaust, though experts believe it is more likely three times that amount.

Hitler Youth: Developed in 1926 to indoctrinate the young. In 1934, all other youth groups were banned and in 1936, membership to the Hitler Youth was compulsory. The focus of the Hitler Youth was to indoctrinate the children in the importance of eugenics, and blind allegiance to Hitler. The Hitler Youth were encouraged to report any disobedience they saw at home or in their schools to their leaders.

Holocaust: Greek origin meaning "sacrifice by fire." Starting in the 1950s, the term “Holocaust” referred to the systematic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of six million Jews by the Nazi regime and its allies and collaborators from 1933 to 1945.

Human Rights: Civil liberties regarded as belonging fundamentally to all persons.

Immigration: the act of entering a country of which one is not a native for permanent residence.

Kindertransport: From 1938 to 1940, the rescue efforts that allowed refugee Jewish children into Great Britain. The outrage of the British people to the November Pogrom led them to appeal to the British government to allow the admission of Jewish children. In total, thousands of children were allowed to enter Great Britain, many of whom would lose their parents during the Holocaust.

Kristallnacht/November Pogrom: On November 9–10, 1938, Nazi leaders unleashed a series of pogroms against the Jewish population in Germany and recently incorporated territories. This event was called *Kristallnacht* (The Night of Broken Glass) by the Nazis to quell public concern. Shattered glass littered the streets after the vandalism and destruction of Jewish-owned businesses, synagogues, and homes, dozens of Jews were murdered, and they were forced to clean the mess and pay for repair. Over 30,000 Jewish men were arrested and sent to Dachau.

Labor Camps: Camps that were established to benefit the Nazi state by exploiting slave labor (forced work without pay). Prisoners in these camps worked under extreme conditions which led to death for many. As WWII continued, the Nazi state relied on labour camps to boost German industries and the war effort.

Liberation: the discovery of German concentration and death camps by Allied forces. The first camp liberated was Majdanek in Poland by Soviet forces in 1944. Many prisoners were forced on death marches but those that remained behind were liberated shortly thereafter. Allied troops found emaciated prisoners many of them would die in the days and weeks after liberation due to disease or their weakened state.

Liquidation: the act of eliminating or killing, typically by violent means. Often used in reference to the liquidation of ghettos by deportation or mass shootings.

Master Race: belief that Germans were members of a superior group of races that Hitler called “Aryan.” Hitler asserted that the German “Aryan” race was gifted above all other races with this biological superiority destining the Germans to rule a vast empire across Eastern Europe.

Medical Experimentation: Cruel experiments performed on victims, often without anesthesia, centered around three topics: survival of military personnel, testing of drugs and treatments, and the advancement of Nazi racial and ideological goals.

Mein Kampf (My Struggle): Book written by Hitler that promoted the key components of Nazism: rabid antisemitism, a racist world view, and an aggressive foreign policy geared to gaining Lebensraum (living space) in eastern Europe.

Nazi Ideology: Nazis believed that human beings could be classified collectively as “races,” with each race bearing distinctive characteristics that had been passed on genetically since the first appearance of humans in prehistoric times. These inherited characteristics related not only to outward appearance and physical structure, but also shaped internal mental life, ways of thinking, creative and organizational abilities, intelligence, taste and appreciation of culture, physical strength, and military prowess.

Nazi Party: National Socialist German Workers’ Party, one of a number of right-wing extremist political groups that emerged in Germany following World War I. Formed in 1919, Hitler would lead the party from 1921 to 1945.

Nuremberg Laws: In September 1935, these racial laws stripped Jews of their German citizenship as only Aryans could be citizens. The legal exclusion of Jews from German life. Other laws would soon follow further excluding Jews.

Partisan: A member of a resistance group. These groups used guerrilla style tactics to disrupt and attack German troops that operated in occupied countries.

Pogrom: Russian word “to wreak havoc.” Organized riots launched against Jews by local residents, and frequently encouraged by the authorities.

Prejudice: bias without sufficient information.

Propaganda: the dissemination of information to influence or control large groups of people. Joseph Goebbels, the Minister of Propaganda for the Third Reich, used film, books, newspapers, radio, and posters to indoctrinate and encourage the persecution of Jews.

Refugee: a person who has been forced to leave their country in order to escape war, persecution, or natural disaster.

Reparations: money that a country or group that loses a war pays because of the damage, injury, deaths, etc., it has caused.

Resistance: took form in different ways during the Holocaust such as through physical means for example partisan groups or organized uprisings. Another way is cultural and spiritual resistance, both of which existed in the ghetto through the continuation of Jewish religious services and celebration of holidays and through the works of Jewish artists who continued to write, and produce art.

Righteous Among the Nations: the title bestowed to someone by the State of Israel and Yad Vashem to a non-Jew who risked their life to save a Jew during the Holocaust for no financial gain in return.

SA: Sturmabteilung in German, also known as StormTroopers or Brownshirts. The SA played a vital role in the early years of the Nazi party as their violent methods of intimidation assisted in Hitler’s rise to power.

Scapegoat: a person or group made to bear the blame for others or to suffer in their place. Jews were the main scapegoat used by Hitler and the Nazi party as they were blamed for all the problems that Germany faced in the years after World War I.

Socialist: A “left wing” political group. During the Weimar Republic, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) often received the most votes and had the largest delegation in the Reichstag. The Nazi party saw the SPD as it main political opponent and after Hitler was appointed Chancellor in 1933 would target the socialists as political enemies of the state.

SS: Schutzstaffel. Hitler’s personal bodyguards that would become a feared organization in the Third Reich. Heinrich Himmler headed the SS. The elite of the Nazi party, recruits had to prove that none of their ancestors were Jewish and could only marry those deemed to be Aryan after getting the consent of their superior officers. Those in the SS were also part of the Einsatzgruppen and were often commandants of concentration and death camps.

Sterilization: A procedure that destroys the ability of a person to reproduce.

Swastika: ancient symbol in the form of an equal-armed cross with each arm continued at a right angle, used (in clockwise form) as the emblem of the German Nazi Party.

T-4 Program: code name for the Nazi Euthanasia Program. Starting 1939, the Nazi officials began the euthanasia of those deemed unable to work or contribute to German society, called “useless eaters”. What began as an operation to rid the state of infants and children with mental or physical disabilities evolved to include adults and would lay the groundwork for the gas chambers. Once the public became aware of the program, protests took place resulting in Hitler publicly ordering a halt to the program, but the euthanasia program continued.

The Great Depression: term used for a severe economic recession that began in the United States in 1929 and would affect economies around the world.

The Third Reich: Reich is the German word for empire. The First Reich was the Holy Roman Empire established around 800 A.D. and lasting until 1806. The Second Reich began with the unification of Germany in 1871 and lasted until 1918 when Kaiser Wilhelm II abdicated prior to the end of World War I. The Third Reich, which Hitler claimed would last a thousand years, only lasted from 1933 to 1945.

Transit Camp: functioned as temporary holding facilities for Jews awaiting deportation. These camps were usually the last stop before deportations to a killing center.

Versailles Treaty: held Germany responsible for starting the war. Germany became liable for the cost of massive material damages.

Wannsee Conference: Held in 1942 at Lake Wannsee, top Nazi officials gathered to discuss a solution to their Jewish problem. At this conference, the “Final Solution” was proposed and approved as an appropriate plan to annihilate the Jewish population of Europe and eventually the world.

World War I: marked the first great international conflict of the twentieth century. The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian crown, and his wife, the Duchess Sophie, in Sarajevo on June 28, 1914, sparked the hostilities. Fighting began in August 1914 and continued on multiple continents for the next four years.

Yom HaShoah: “Day of Remembrance” or Holocaust Memorial Day. This day commemorates the Holocaust and the six million Jewish lives who perished.