

Common Student Questions about the Holocaust

1. How could Hitler make the Holocaust happen by himself?

Hitler did not make the Holocaust happen himself. Many, many Germans and non-Germans were involved in the so-called "Final Solution." Besides the SS, German government and Nazi party officials who helped to plan and carry out the deportation, concentration and murder of European Jews, many other "ordinary" people – such as civil servants, doctors, lawyers, judges, soldiers and railroad workers – played a role in the Holocaust. Link to this [activity \(http://www.ushmm.org/education/foreducators/workshop/pdf/assessing.pdf\)](http://www.ushmm.org/education/foreducators/workshop/pdf/assessing.pdf) to explore this question in greater detail by considering the level of responsibility of individuals in all walks of life in and out of Germany.

2. Why didn't they all leave?

Frequently, this question refers to German Jews before the start of 1939. Consider what is involved in leaving one's homeland as well as what sacrifices must be made. German Jews were in most cases patriotic citizens. More than 10,000 died fighting for Germany in World War I, and countless others were wounded and received medals for their valor and service. Jews, whether in the lower, middle or upper classes, had lived in Germany for centuries and were well assimilated in the early 20th century.

It is important to consider how the oppressive measures targeting Jews in the pre-war period were passed and enforced gradually. These types of pre-war measures and laws had been experienced throughout the history of the Jewish people in earlier periods and in other countries as well. No one at the time could foresee or predict killing squads and killing centers.

Once the difficult decision was made to try to leave the country, a prospective emigrant had to find a country willing to admit them and their family. This was very difficult, considering world immigration policies, as demonstrated by the results of the Evian Conference of 1938. If a haven could be found, consider other things that would be needed to get there.

To illustrate the difficult dilemma of trying to leave Germany, use the activity sheets linked below. The answer to this seemingly simple question becomes very complicated.

[Documentation Required for Immigration Visas to Enter the United States](http://www.ushmm.org/education/foreducators/workshop/pdf/immigrationvisas.pdf) can be accessed at: <http://www.ushmm.org/education/foreducators/workshop/pdf/immigrationvisas.pdf>

3.

[Documentation Required for Emigration from Germany](http://www.ushmm.org/education/foreducators/workshop/pdf/emigration.pdf) can be accessed at: <http://www.ushmm.org/education/foreducators/workshop/pdf/emigration.pdf>

4. Why wasn't there more resistance?

The impression that Jews did not fight back against the Nazis is a myth. Jews carried out acts of resistance in every country of Europe that the Germans occupied, as well as in satellite states. They even resisted in ghettos, concentration camps and killing centers, under the most harrowing of circumstances. Why is it then that the myth endures? Period photographs and contemporary feature films may serve to perpetuate it because they often depict large numbers of Jews boarding trains under the watchful eyes of a few lightly armed guards. Not seen in these images, yet key to understanding Jewish response to Nazi terror, are the obstacles to resistance. To deepen understanding of both what is needed to resist

an oppressive regime and the factors that deter resistance, try the exercise at the [Online Workshop](http://www.ushmm.org/education/foreducators/workshop/) (located at <http://www.ushmm.org/education/foreducators/workshop/>), scroll down to Sample Lessons and read Lesson Three.

5. How did they know who was Jewish?

Eventually, Jews in Germany were locatable through census records. In other countries, Jews might be found via synagogue membership lists, municipal lists or more likely through mandatory registration and information from neighbors or local civilians and officials.

6. What happened if you disobeyed an order to participate?

Contrary to popular assumption, those who decided to stop or not participate in atrocities were usually given other responsibilities, such as guard duty or crowd control. Quiet non-compliance was widely tolerated, but public denunciation of Nazi anti-Jewish policy was not.

7. Wasn't one of Hitler's relatives Jewish?

There is no historical evidence to suggest that Adolf Hitler was Jewish. Recent scholarship suggests that the rumors about Hitler's ancestry were circulated by political opponents as a way of discrediting the leader of an antisemitic party. These rumors persist primarily because the identity of Hitler's paternal grandfather is unknown; rumors that this grandfather was Jewish have never been proven.

For more information read [ADOLF HITLER: EARLY YEARS, 1889-1913](http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/article.php?lang=en&ModuleId=10007430), located at <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/article.php?lang=en&ModuleId=10007430>.

8. Why were the Jews singled out for extermination?

The explanation of the Nazis' hatred of Jews rests on their distorted world view, which saw history as a racial struggle. They considered the Jews a race whose goal was world domination and who, therefore, were an obstruction to "Aryan" dominance. They believed that all of history was a fight between races, which should culminate in the triumph of the superior "Aryan" race. Therefore, they considered it their duty to eliminate the Jews, whom they regarded as a threat. In their eyes, the Jews' racial origin made them habitual criminals who could never be rehabilitated and were hopelessly corrupt and inferior. There is no doubt that other factors contributed toward Nazi hatred of Jews and their distorted image of the Jewish people. These included the centuries-old tradition of Christian antisemitism, which propagated a negative stereotype of Jews as murderers of Christ, agents of the devil and practitioners of witchcraft. Also significant was the political antisemitism of the latter half of the 19th and early part of the 20th centuries, which singled out Jews as a threat to the established order of society. These combined to point to Jews as a target for persecution and ultimate destruction by the Nazis.

More information can be found in several Holocaust Encyclopedia articles. Start with the overview of [Antisemitism](http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/article.php?lang=en&ModuleId=10005175), located at <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/article.php?lang=en&ModuleId=10005175>, and then read the related articles on antisemitism through the centuries.

9. What did the United States know and do?

Despite a history of providing sanctuary to persecuted peoples, the United States grappled with many issues during the 1930s that made staying true to this legacy difficult, among them wide-spread antisemitism, xenophobia, isolationism and a sustained economic depression. Unfortunate for those fleeing from Nazi persecution, these issues greatly

impacted this nation's refugee policy, resulting in tighter restrictions and limited quotas at a time when open doors might have saved lives.

Over the years, scholarly investigation into the American reaction to the Holocaust has raised a number of questions, such as: What did America know? What did government officials and civilians do with this knowledge? Could more have been done? Scholars have gauged America's culpability through the government's restrictive immigration measures, its indifference to reported atrocities and its sluggish efforts to save European Jews. Debates have sparked over key events, including the St. Louis tragedy, the establishment of the War Refugee Board, the role of the American Jewish community, the media's coverage of Nazi violence and the proposed, but abandoned, bombing of Auschwitz. The topic continues to evolve with the introduction of new documentation and revised hypotheses.

Source: U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum

Other Resources:

Various national and international museums have compiled a list of frequently asked questions about the Holocaust. These sources address questions often asked at Holocaust Museum Houston.

The **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum** lists frequently asked questions by subject matter on its Web site. The site includes sections entitled:

- About the Holocaust,
- About the Camps,
- About the Victims,
- About Rescue and Resistance and
- About Anne Frank.

To access this site, visit:

<http://www.ushmm.org/research/library/faq/details.php?lang=en&topic=01#01>

Yad Vashem /The Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority is the major museum in Israel devoted to understanding and teaching about the Holocaust. Its Web site lists 38 questions about the Holocaust.

To access the Yad Vashem Web site, visit:

http://www1.yadvashem.org/Odot/prog/index_before_change_table.asp?gate=5-0

The **Simon Wiesenthal Center/Museum of Tolerance** has a multimedia learning center which lists 36 frequent questions.

To access its Web site, visit:

<http://motlc.wiesenthal.com/site/pp.asp?c=gvKVLcMVluG&b=394663>