Glossary of Terms, Places and Personalities from Simon Wiesenthal Center

AKTION (German)     Operation involving the mass assembly, deportation, and murder of Jews by the Nazis during the Holocaust.

ALLIES      The nations fighting Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy during World War II; primarily the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union.


ANSCHLUSS (German)     Incorporation of Austria into Germany on March 13, 1938. “CONNECTION”

ARYAN RACE   “Aryan” was originally applied to people who any Indo-European language. The Nazi's however, primarily applied the term to people of Northern European racial background. Their aim was to avoid what they considered the “bastardization of the German race” and to preserve the purity of European blood. (see Nuremberg Laws).

AUSCHWITZ     Concentration and extermination camp in upper Silesia, Poland. Established in 1940 as a concentration camp, it became an extermination camp in early 1942. Eventually, it consisted of three sections: Auschwitz I was the main camp; Auschwitz II (Birkenau) was an extermination camp; Auschwitz III (Monowitz) was the I.G. Farben labor camp, also known as Buna. In addition, Auschwitz has numerous subsidiary camps.

AXIS     The Axis powers were originally Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy (the Rome-Berlin Axis). When Japan entered World War II, this pact was extended to include that country, as well. (The Berlin-Rome-Tokyo Axis).

BAECK, LEO     Chief Rabbi of Berlin during the time that the Nazis were in power. He became Chief of the Reich Association of Jews in Germany, an organization responsible to the Nazis regime concerning Jewish matters. Baeck refused to leave his flock.

BISHOP ANGELO RONCALLI    Papal delegate to Turkey who issued Baptismal certificates to save Hungarian Jews from Auschwitz/ Later became Pope John XXIII.

BLITZKREIG     Lighting warfare name given to Nazi Air Force used during World War II.

CHAMBERLAIN     Prime Minister of England – He created the idea of Appeasement (policy followed by the British and French/ they gave into Hitler's demands and thus encouraged his aggressive behavior), which included the Munich Pact; where the Allies agreed to surrender Czechoslovakia to Hitler; article 231 – the part of the treaty of Versailles - that blamed Germany for World War I and Hitler used this to help gain his power.
DEHUMANIZE  Eliminating the human qualities from any group in order to justify their murder.

DER STUERMER  “The Assailant” was an antisemitic German weekly, founded and edited by Julius Streicher, which was published in Nuremberg between 1923 and 1945.

EICHMANN, ADOLF  SS Lieutenant-Colonel and head of the “Jewish Section” of the Gestapo: he was instrumental in implementing the “Final Solution” by organizing the transportation of Jews from all over Europe to death camps. Eichmann participated in the Wannsee Conference on January 20, 1942 and was arrested at the end of World War II in the American Zone, but escaped, went underground, and disappeared. On May 11, 1960, members of the Israeli Secret Service discovered him in Argentina and smuggled him to Israel. Eichmann was tried in Jerusalem (April -December 1961), convicted, and sentenced to death. He was executed on May 31, 1962.

EINSATZGRUPPEN  Mobile killing units of Security Police and SS Security Service that followed the German armies into the Soviet Union in June, 1941. They were supported by units of uniformed German Order Police and auxiliaries of volunteers (Ukrainian, Latvian, Lithuanian, and Estonian) for murders. Their victims, primarily Jews, were executed by shooting and buried in mass graves from which they were later exhumed and burned. At least a million Jews were killed in this manner. There were 4 Einsatzgruppen (A,B,C,D) which were subdivided into Einsatzgruppen.

EUTHANASIA  The original meaning of this term was easy and painless death for the terminally ill. However, the Nazis' euthanasia program took on quite a different meaning: the taking of eugenic measures to improve the quality of the German “race”. This was the beginning of a development that culminated in enforced “mercy” deaths for incurably insane, permanently disabled, deformed, and “superfluous”. In due course, three major classifications were developed: 1. euthanasia for incurables; 2. direct extermination by “special treatment”; and 3. experiments in mass sterilization.

EVIAN CONFERENCE  Conference convened by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, in July 1938, to discuss the problem of refugees. 32 States met at Evian-les Bains, France. However, not much was accomplished, since most Western countries were reluctant to accept the Jewish refugees.

EXTERMINATION CAMPS  Nazi camps for mass killing by gas of Jews and others (e.g. Gypsies, Russian prisoners-of-war, ill prisoners). Known as “death camps”, these were: Auschwitz-Birkenau, Belzec, Chelmo, Majdanek, Sobibor, and Treblinka. All located in Eastern Europe.

FINAL SOLUTION  The cover name for the plan to destroy the Jews of Europe, the “Final Solution of the Jewish Question”. Beginning in December 1941 Jews were rounded up and sent to concentration camps in the East. The program was deceptively disguised as a “resettlement in the East.

FATHER MAXIMILLIAN KOLBE  Catholic priest who was sent to Auschwitz for hiding Jews; the Catholic Church made him a saint; a truly courageous person.
FRANK, ANNE A Jewish teenager who became the symbol of courage and hope in spite of her plight in life (Read the Anne Frank Diary)

FRANK, HANS Governor-General of occupied Poland. A Nazi from the earliest days (Hitler's personal lawyer), he announced, “Poland will be treated like a colony; the Poles will become slaves of the Greater German Reich”. By 1942, more than 85% of the Jews in Poland had been transported to extermination camps. Frank was tried at Nuremberg, convicted, and executed in 1946.

FRICK, WILHELM A dedicated Nazi bureaucrat who was appointed Minister of the Interior in 1933. In 1946, he was tried at Nuremberg, convicted and executed.

GENOCIDE The partial or entire destruction of religious, racial or national groups.

GERSTEIN, KURT Head of the Waffen SS Institute of Hygiene in Berlin. While maintaining ties with the resistance, Gerstein purchased the gas needed in Auschwitz, officially for fumigation purposes, but actually used for killing of Jews. He passed on information about the killings to Swedish representatives and Vatican papal nuncios. Overwhelmed with remorse he hanged himself in a French jail after the war. His is the author of a widely quoted description of a gassing procedure in Belzec, protagonist of Rolf Hochhuth's The Deputy, and the subject of Saul Friedlander's biography, The Ambiguity of Good.

GHETTO The Nazis revived the medieval ghetto to describe their compulsory “Jewish Quarter” (Wohnbezirk). These were poor sections of a city where all Jews from the surrounding areas were forced to reside. Surrounded by barred wire or walls, the ghettos were sealed. Established mostly in Eastern Europe (Lodz, Warsaw, Vilna, Riga, Minsk), the ghettos were characterized by overcrowding, starvation, and heavy labor. All eventually dissolved and the Jews deported to death camps.

GOEBBELS, JOSEF Minister of Propaganda– He inspired riots and spread falsehood and lies.

GOERING, HERMANN An early member of the Nazi party, Goering participated in Hitler's “beer hall Putsch” in Munich in 1923 (see Adolf Hitler). After its failure, he went to Sweden where he lived (for a time in a mental institution) until 1927. In 1928, he was elected to the Reichstag and became its president in 1932. hen Hitler came to power in 1933, he made Goering Air Minister of Germany and Prime Minister of Prussia. He was responsible for the rearmament program and especially for the creation of the German Air Force. In 1939, Hitler designated him his successor. During World War II he was virtual dictator of the German economy and was responsible for the total air war Germany waged. Convicted at Nuremberg, in 1946, Goering committed suicide by taking poison just 2 hours before his scheduled execution.

GREATER GERMAN REICH Designation of an expanded Germany that was intended to include all German speaking peoples. It was one of Hitler's most important aims. After the conquest of most of Western Europe during World War II it became a reality for a short time.
GRYNSZPAN, HERSCHEL  A Polish Jewish youth who had emigrated to Paris. He agonized over the fate of his parents who in the course of a pre-war round up of Polish Jews living in Germany were deported to Poland, where they were shoved back and forth in the no-man's land between the two countries. On November 7, 1938, he went to the German Embassy and shot and mortally wounded Third Secretary Ernst von Rath. The Nazis used this as an excuse for KRISTALLNACHT (Night of the Broken Glass).

GYPSIES  A nomadic people, believed to have come originally from northwest India, from where they immigrated to Persia in the first millennium. They divided into 5 main groups that still exist today. Traveling in small caravans, their bands are lead by Elders. Gypsies appeared in Western Europe in the 15th century. By the 16th century, they had spread throughout Europe, where they were persecuted almost as relentlessly as the Jews. It is believed that approximately 500,000 perished during the Holocaust. NOTE: Gypsy victims were shot not gassed.

HESS, RUDOLF  Hitler's deputy; was at his side from the earliest days of the Nazi movement. On May 10, 1941, he flew alone from Augsburg and parachuted, landing in Scotland where he was promptly interned. The purpose of his flight have never become clear. He probably wanted to persuade the British to make peace with Hitler as soon as he attacked the Soviet Union. Hitler promptly declared him insane. Hess was tried at Nuremberg, found guilty and was sentenced to life imprisonment. He was the only Nazi in Spandau Prison until his apparently committed suicide in 1987.

HEYDRICH, REINHARD  Former naval officer who joined the SS in 1932, after dismissal from the Navy. He headed the SS Security Service (SD), a Nazi party intelligence agency. In 1933-1934, he became head of the political police the Gestapo and later of the criminal police the Kripo. He combined the Gestapo and Kripo into the Security Police (SIPO). In 1939, Heydrich combined the SD and SIPO into the Reich Security Main Office. He organized the EINSATZGRUPPEN which killed Jews in occupied Russia in 1941-1942 and in 1941 was asked by Goering to implement a “Final Solution to the Jewish Question”. In January 1942, he presided over the Wannsee Conference, an international meeting to coordinate the Final Solution. In 1941, he also appointed protector of Bohemia and Moravia. On May 29, 1942, he was assassinated by Czech partisans who parachuted in from England. (For consequences of this assassination, see Lidice).

HITLER, ADOLF  Fuhrer and Reich Chancellor. Although born in Austria, he settled in Germany in 1913. At the outbreak of World War I he enlisted in the Bavarian Army, became a corporal and received the Iron Cross First Class for bravery. Returning to Munich after the war, he joined the newly formed German Worker's Party which soon reorganized under his leadership as the National Socialist German Workers Party (NSDAP). In November 1923 he unsuccessfully attempted to forcibly bring Germany under national control. When his coup, known as the “Beer Hall Putsch”, failed Hitler was arrested and sentenced to 5 years in prison. It was during this time that he wrote Mein Kampf. Serving only 9 months of the sentence, Hitler quickly reentered German politics and soon out poled his political rivals in national
elections. In January 1933, Hindenburg made Hitler chancellor of a coalition cabinet but Hitler (who took office on January 30, 1933) immediately began to set up a dictatorship. In 1934, the chancellorship and presidency were united in the person of Fuhrer. Soon, all other parties were outlawed and opposition brutally suppressed. By 1938, Hitler implemented his dream of a “Greater Germany” first annexing Austria; then (with the acquiesce of the Western democracies), the Sudentenland (the German province of Czechoslovakia); and, finally, Czechoslovakia itself. On September 1, 1939, Hitler's armies invaded Poland. By this time the Western Democracies realized that no agreement with Hitler could be honored and World War II had begun. Although, initially victorious on all fronts, Hitler's armies began suffering setbacks shortly after America joined the war in December 1941 (Note: This was after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor). Although the war was obviously lost by early 1945, Hitler insisted that Germany fight until the death. On April 30, 1945, Hitler committed suicide rather than being captured alive.

HOLOCAUST The destruction of some 6 million Jews by the Nazis and their followers in Europe between the years 1933-1945. Other individuals and groups suffered grievously during this period, but only the Jews were marked for complete and utter annihilation. The term “Holocaust” literally meaning “ a completely burnt sacrifice” - tends to suggest a sacrificial connotation to what occurred. The word SHOAH originally a Biblical term meaning widespread disaster is the modern Hebrew equivalent.

JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES A religious sect, originating in America, organized by Charles Taze Russell, whose doctrine centers on the Second Coming of Christ. The witnesses base their beliefs on the bible and have no official ministers. Recognizing only the Kingdom of God, the Witnesses refuse to salute the flag, bear arms in war, and participate in the affairs of government. This doctrine brought into conflict with the National Socialism. They were considered enemies of the state and relentlessly persecuted.

JUDENRAT Council of Jewish representatives set up in communities and ghettos under the Nazis to carry out their instructions.

JUDENREIN German for “clean of Jews”, denoting areas where all Jews had been either murdered or deported.

KAPO Prisoner in charge of a group of inmates in Nazi concentration camps.

KRISTALLNACHT “Night Of Broken Glass”... Pogrom (mass riot) unleashed by the Nazis on November 9-10, 1938. All over Germany and Austria, synagogues and other Jewish institutions were burned down; Jewish stores were destroyed; and their contents were looted. At the same time, approximately 35,000 Jewish men were sent to concentration camps. The “excuse” for this action was the assassination of Ernst von Rath in Paris by a Jewish teenager whose parents were rounded up by the Nazis.

LIDICE Czech mining village (pop. 700)... In reprisal for the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich, the Nazis “liquidated” the village in 1942. They shot the men; deported the women
and children to concentration camps; razed the village to the ground; and struck its name off the maps. After World War II, a new village was built near the site of old Lidice, which is now a national park and memorial.

LODZ City in Western Poland, (renamed Litzmanstadt by the Nazis) where the first major ghetto was created in April 1940. By September 1941, the population of the ghetto was 144,000 in an area of 1.6 square miles, (statistically, 5.8 people per room). In October 1941, 20,000 Jews from Germany, Austria and the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia were sent to the Lodz Ghetto. Deportation from Lodz during 1942 and June-July 1944 led to the extermination camp Chelmno. In August-September 1944, the ghetto was dissolved and the remaining 60,000 Jews were sent to Auschwitz.

MAUTHAUSEN CONCENTRATION CAMP A camp for men, opened in August 1938 near Linz in northern Austria. Mauthausen was classified by the SS as a camp of most severity, and conditions there were brutal even by concentration camp standards. Nearly 125,000 prisoners of various nationalities were either worked or tortured to death at the camp before liberating American troops arrived in May 1945.

MAJDANEK Mass murder camp in Eastern Poland... At first a labor camp for Russians, it was turned into a gassing center for Jews. Majdanek was liberated by the Red Army in July 1944, but not before 250,000 men, women and children had lost their lives there.

MEIN KAMPF This autobiographical book by Hitler was written while he was imprisoned in the Landsberg fortress after the “Beer-Hall Putsch” in 1923. In this book, Hitler propounds all his ideas, beliefs, and plans for the future of Germany. Everything including his foreign policy is permeated by his “racial ideology”. The Germans, belonging to the “superior” Aryan race have a right to “living space” (Lebensraum) in the East, which is inhabited by the “inferior” Slavs. Throughout the book he accuses the Jews of being the source for all evil, equating them with Bolshevism and, at the same time, with international capitalism. Unfortunately, those people who read the book except for his admirers) did not take it seriously but considered it the ravings of a manic.

MENGELE, JOSEPH SS Physician at Auschwitz, notorious for pseudo-medical experiments, especially on twins and Gypsies. He “selected” new arrivals by simply pointing to the right or the left, thus separating those considered able to work from those who were not. Those too weak, or too old to work, were sent straight to the gas chambers after all their possessions, including their clothes, were taken for resale in Germany. After the war, he spent some time in a British internment hospital but disappeared, went underground, and escaped to Argentina, later to Paraguay, where he became a citizen in 1959. He was hunted by Interpol, Israeli agents, and Simon Wiesenthal. In 1986 his body was found in Embu, Brazil.

MUSSELMANN Nazi camp slang word for prisoner on the brink of death.

NIGHT & FOG DECREES Issued on December 7, 1941, by Hitler, to seize “persons endangering German Security” who were to vanish without a trace into the night and fog.
NUREMBERG LAWS   Two anti-Jewish statutes enacted in 1935 during the Nazi party's national convention in Nuremberg. The first, The Reich Citizenship Law, deprived German Jews of their citizenship and all rights pertinent thereto. The second, the law for Protection of the German Blood and Honor, outlawed marriages of Jews and non-Jews, forbade Jews from employing females of childbearing age, and prohibited Jews from displaying the German flag. Many additional regulations were attached to the two main statutes which provided the basis for removing Jews from all spheres of German political, social, and economic life. The Nuremberg Laws carefully established definitions of Jewishness based on bloodlines. Thus many Germans of mixed ancestry called “mischlinge”, faced anti-semitic discrimination if they had a Jewish grandparent.

PARTISANS   Irregular troops engaged in guerrilla warfare, often within enemy lines. During World War II, this term was applied to all resistance fighters in Nazi-occupied countries.

PROTOCOLS OF THE LEARNED   A major piece of anti-semitic propaganda, written by members of the Russian Secret Police. Essentially it was a copy of a French polemic, by the French lawyer, Maurice Joly, and directed by Napoleon III. Substituting Jewish leaders, the Protocols maintained that Jews were plotting world dominion by setting Christian against Christian, corrupting Christian morals and attempting to destroy the economic and political viability of the West. It gained great popularity after World War II and was translated into many languages. It encouraged anti-semitism in Germany, France, Great Britain, and the United States. It has long been repudiated as an absurd and hateful lie. The book currently has been reprinted and is widely distributed by Neo-Nazis and third world countries who are committed to the destruction of the State of Israel.

RATH, ERNEST VOM   Third secretary at the German Embassy in Paris, who was assassinated on November 7, 1938 by Herschel Grynszpan (see Grynszpan, Herschel).

RIGHTEOUS OF THE NATIONS   Term applied to those non-Jews who saved Jews (RIGHTEOUS GENTILES) from their Nazi persecutors, at the risk of their own lives.

SCHULTE, EDWARD   German Industrialist who secretly told the world about the Final Solution (His name became known in 1986)

(abbreviation: Sturmabteilungen): the storm troopers of the early Nazi party; org in 1921.

SELECTION   Euphemism for the process of choosing victims for the gas chambers in the Nazi camps by separating them from those considered fit to work. (see Mengele)

SOBIBOR   Extermination camp in the Lublin district in Eastern Poland (see Belzec; Extermination camp). Sobibor opened in May 1942 and closed after the rebellion of the Jewish prisoners on October 14, 1943. At least 250,000 Jews were killed there.

SCHINDLER, OSCAR   German Industrialist who saved and shelter a few thousands of Jews from the Nazis. He used them in his factories. (read or view the movie).
SS   Abbreviation usually written with two lightening symbols, for Schutzstaffel (Protective Units), originally organized as Hitler's personal bodyguards, the SS was transformed into a giant organization by Heinrich Himmler. Although various SS units were assigned to the battlefield, the organization is best known for carrying out the destruction of European Jewry.

SS ST. LOUIS   The steamship St. Louis was a refugee ship that left Europe in the spring of 1939, bound for Cuba. When the ship arrived, only 22 of the 1128 refugees were allowed to disembark. Initially no country, including the United States, was willing to accept the others. The ship finally had to return to Europe where most of the refugees were finally granted entry into England, Holland, France and Belgium.

STRUMA   Name of a boat carrying 769 Jewish refugees, which left Rumania late in 1941. It was refused entry to Palestine or Turkey, and was tugged out of the Black Sea where it sank in February 1942, with the loss of all on board except one.

SWASTIKA   An ancient symbol that became the symbol for Hitler's Third Reich.

TEREZIN (CZECH)   Established in early 1942 outside Prague as a “model” ghetto, Theresienstadt was not a sealed section of the town, but rather an 18th century Austrian garrison. It became a Jewish town, governed by the SS. When the deportations from central Europe to the extermination camps began in the spring of 1942. Certain groups were initially excluded: invalids; partners in mixed marriage, and their children; and prominent Jews with special connections. These were sent to the ghetto in Terezin. They were joined by old and young Jews from the Protectorate, and later by small numbers of prominent Jews from Denmark and Holland. Its large barracks served as dormitories, and communal kitchens. The Nazis used Terezin to deceive the public opinion. They tolerated a lively cultural life of theater, music, lectures and art. Thus it could be shown to officials of the International Red Cross. Terezin, however, was only a station on the road to the extermination camps; about 88,000 were deported to their deaths in the East. In April, 1945, only 17,000 Jews remained in Terezin, where they were joined by 14,000 Jewish concentration camp prisoners, evacuated from the camps threatened by the Allied armies. On May 8, 1945, Terezin was liberated by the Red Army.

UMSCHLAGPLATZ   German word meaning “transshipment place”. It was a square in the Warsaw Ghetto where the Jews herded together for deportation to Treblinka.

WANNSEE   Lake near Berlin where the Wannsee conference was held on January 20, 1942. It was an intramural meeting to coordinate the “Final Solution” and was attended by Heydrich Eichmann, and other ranking Nazis.

WALLENBERG, RAOUL   Swedish industrialist who, in 1944, went to Hungary on a mission to save as many Jews as possible by handing out Swedish papers, passports and visas. He is credited with saving the lives of at least 30,000 people. After the liberation of Budapest, he was mysteriously taken into custody by the Russians and that is the last is known of him. Reported
sightings of him indicate that he may still be alive. An international effort is underway to find out what really happened.

WARSAW GHETTO Established in November 1940, the Ghetto was surrounded by a wall confining almost 500,000 Jews. Nearly 45,000 Jews died there in 1941 alone, due to overcrowding, force labor, lack of sanitation, starvation and disease. A revolt took place in the Ghetto in April 1943, when the Germans, commanded by General Jurgen Stroop, attempted to raze the Ghetto and deport the remaining inhabitants to Treblinka. The uprising, led by Mordecai Anielewicz lasted 28 days.

WHITE ROSE Three German youths who distributed 4 anti Nazi leaflets in 1942-43 were beheaded for their actions.

YELLOW BADGE A distinctive sign which Jews were compelled to wear in the Middle Ages. The Nazis adopted the concept to wear a distinctive badge or arm band with the star of David.

Overview of Events

1933 -1945 The years of Hitler's rule in Germany.
1939 -1945 The years of World War II.
1941 -1945 The years the U.S. Was involved in W.W.II.

September 1, 1939 Germany invades Poland – W.W.II begins.
December 7, 1941 The Japanese attack Pearl Harbor/ The U.S. Enters W.W.II.
Admiral Yamamoto Japanese officer who planned the attack on Pearl Harbor. Later he was shot by the U.S. in an ambush.
Battle of Britain England defeats the German Air Force over the skies of England/ Saves England from invasion.
Fascism Type of government that was found in Italy and Spain at this time no freedom for anyone.
F.D.R. Franklin Delano Roosevelt U.S. President during W.W.II.
League of Nations Too weak to stop aggression of the 1930's by the dictators.
Mussolini Italian Dictator who led Italy into W.W.II.
Pearl Harbor Naval Base attacked by the Japanese.
Prime Minister ToJo – Japan's leader who was executed for war crimes after the war.
Spanish Civil War The Allies do nothing and allow Hitler & Mussolini to help the Fascists conquer Spain.
Winston Churchill Great English Prime Minister and leader who led his country during W.W.II.