

1.

The Holocaust is the term used to denote the murder of six million Jews by Nazi Germany during World War II. Jews refer to the event as the Shoah. The roots of the Holocaust however, can be traced back to the situation in Germany at the end of the World War I.

Cohn-Sherbok explains that the ideology of the Nazi party was based on German nationalism, anti-capitalism, and anti-Semitism. According to Hitler, the Jews were responsible for Germany's defeat in World War I as well as the economic and cultural decline which followed.

During the next few years, Jews were gradually stripped of their position in society by being eliminated from the civil service, the legal and medical professions and cultural and educational institutions. Eventually laws were passed which relegated Jews to the position of second-class citizens. Their businesses were closed, and they were forbidden to share public spaces such as parks and libraries with non-Jews, in the hope that this treatment would force them to leave Germany. In November 1938, however, the Nazi party organised what Cohn-Sherbok describes as 'an onslaught against the Jewish population in which Jews were murdered and Jewish property was destroyed. This event, known as Kristallnacht, was a prelude to the Holocaust which brought about a new stage in modern Jewish history.'

With the outbreak of World War II pressure on Jews in Germany increased, and the Nazi party prepared for what was to become known as the Final Solution to the Jewish problem. At first the Jewish population was forced to live in ghettos, until finally they were rounded up and sent to death camps. In 1942 Auschwitz became the central extermination centre where Jews and members of other minority groups were sent to their deaths in the gas chamber. It has been estimated that by the end of the war in 1945, about six million Jews had been killed.

(Adapted from *Judaism* by Helen Gwynne-Kinsey).

2.

The word 'Holocaust', from the Greek words 'holos' (whole) and 'kaustos' (burned), was historically used to describe a sacrificial offering burned on an altar. Since 1945, the word has taken on a new and horrible meaning: the mass murder of some 6 million European Jews (as well as members of some other persecuted

groups, such as Gypsies and homosexuals) by the German Nazi regime during the Second World War. To the anti-Semitic Nazi leader Adolf Hitler, Jews were an inferior race, an alien threat to German racial purity and community. After years of Nazi rule in Germany, during which Jews were consistently persecuted, Hitler's 'final solution'— now known as the Holocaust — came to fruition under the cover of world war, with mass killing centres constructed in the concentration camps of occupied Poland.

The roots of Hitler's particularly virulent brand of anti-Semitism are unclear. Born in Austria in 1889, he served in the German army during World War I. Like many anti-Semites in Germany, he blamed the Jews for the country's defeat in 1918. Soon after the war ended, Hitler joined the National German Workers' Party, which became the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP), known to English speakers as the Nazis. While imprisoned for treason for his role in the Beer Hall Putsch of 1923, Hitler wrote the memoir and propaganda tract 'Mein Kampf' (My Struggle), in which he predicted a general European war that would result in 'the extermination of the Jewish race in Germany'. Hitler was obsessed with the idea of the superiority of the 'pure' German race, which he called 'Aryan', and with the need for 'Lebensraum', or living space, for that race to expand. In the decade after he was released from prison, Hitler took advantage of the weakness of his rivals to enhance his party's status and rise from obscurity to power. On January 20, 1933, he was named chancellor of Germany. After President Paul von Hindenburg's death in 1934, Hitler anointed himself as 'Führer', becoming Germany's supreme ruler.

In 1933, Jews in Germany numbered around 525,000, or only 1 percent of the total German population. During the next six years, Nazis undertook an 'Aryanization' of Germany, dismissing non-Aryans from civil service, liquidating Jewish-owned businesses and stripping Jewish lawyers and doctors of their clients. Under the Nuremberg Laws of 1935, anyone with three or four Jewish grandparents was considered a Jew, while those with two Jewish grandparents were designated Mischlinge (half-breeds). Under the Nuremberg Laws, Jews became routine targets for stigmatization and persecution. This culminated in Kristallnacht, or the 'night of broken glass' in November 1938, when German synagogues were burned and windows in Jewish shops were smashed; some 100 Jews were killed and thousands more arrested. From 1933 to 1939, hundreds of thousands of Jews who were able to leave Germany did, while those who remained lived in a constant state of uncertainty and fear.

(Adapted from *The Holocaust* at www.history.com)



3.

The Holocaust was the Nazis' assault on the Jews between 1933 and 1945. It culminated in what the Nazis called the 'Final Solution of the Jewish Question in Europe', in which six million Jews were murdered.

The Jews were not the only victims of Nazism. It is estimated that as many as 15 million civilians were killed by this murderous and racist regime, including millions of Slavs and 'asiatics', 200,000 Gypsies and members of various other groups. Thousands of people, including Germans of African descent, were forcibly sterilised.

These programmes are best seen as a series of linked genocides, each having its own history, background, purpose and significance in the Nazi scheme of things. The Holocaust was the biggest of the killing programmes and, in certain important ways, different from the others. The Jews figured in Nazi ideology as the arch-enemy of the 'Aryan race', and were targeted not merely for terror and repression but for complete extinction. The Nazis failed in this aim because they ran out of time, but they pursued it fanatically until their defeat in 1945. The Holocaust led to widespread public awareness of genocide and to modern efforts to prevent it, such as the 1948 UN Convention on Genocide.

(Adapted from *Overview of the Holocaust* at www.bbc.co.uk)

EXAMPLE OF A FINAL SUMMARY

The word 'Holocaust', from the Greek words 'holos' (whole) and 'kaustos' (burned), was historically used to describe a sacrificial offering burned on an altar. Since 1945, the word has taken on a new and horrible meaning: the mass murder of some 6 million European Jews. Jews refer to the event as the Shoah.

According to Hitler, the Jews were responsible for Germany's defeat in World War I as well as the economic and cultural decline which followed. Hitler was obsessed with the idea of the superiority of the 'pure' German race, which he called 'Aryan', and with the need for 'Lebensraum', or living space, for that race to expand. In the decade after he was released from prison, Hitler took advantage of the weakness of his rivals to enhance his party's status and rise from obscurity to power. The Jews figured in Nazi ideology as the arch-enemy of the 'Aryan race', and were targeted not merely for terror and repression but for complete extinction. During the next few years Jews were gradually stripped of their position in society.

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The Jews were not the only victims of Nazism. It is estimated that as many as 15 million civilians were killed by this murderous and racist regime, including millions of Slavs and 'asiatics', 200,000 Gypsies and members of various other groups. Thousands of people, including Germans of African descent, were forcibly sterilised. The Holocaust led to widespread public awareness of genocide and to modern efforts

to prevent it, such as the 1948 UN Convention on Genocide.

Here are three more resources- this time there is a more specific focus on the Holocaust theologian Richard Rubenstein (Theme 2C). Try yourself to make a summary.

1.

RUBENSTEIN, RICHARD LOWELL (Born 1924), U.S. rabbi and theologian. Rubenstein was born in New York City; his parents were non-observant Jews and he did not have a bar mitzvah. He was tempted to enter the ministry but was told that he would have to change his name. Instead, he embraced his own tradition. He entered Hebrew Union College to study for the rabbinate, simultaneously attending the University of Cincinnati (BA 1946). He was at HUC during the Holocaust years when the reality of Jewish life clashed with the optimistic liberalism of Reform Judaism. Becoming more observant, he switched to JTS when Abraham Joshua Heschel left HUC to join the Seminary faculty. He was ordained at the Seminary and received his MHL in 1952. While serving as rabbi in Brockton (1952–54) and in Natick (1954–56), Massachusetts, and as interim director of the Hillel Foundation at Harvard (1956–58), he studied at Harvard Divinity School where he received his STM (1955) and at the graduate school where he received his Ph.D. in 1960.

In 1958 he became director of Hillel and chaplain to Jewish students at the University of Pittsburgh (1958). In 1969 he was appointed adjunct professor of humanities at the University of Pittsburgh. Given the controversy of his writings and what he defined as ‘bureaucratic excommunication’, Rubenstein’s career in the rabbinate was stymied but academic positions in religion were becoming open to Jewish scholars. From 1971 to 1995, he was a professor of religion at Florida State University. In February 2001 the university created a professorship in his name. In 1987 the JTS conferred the degree of Doctor of Hebrew Letters, *honoris causa*, upon him. Many years later, Rubenstein became president of the University of Bridgeport.

There is general agreement among theologians that Rubenstein’s first book, *After Auschwitz* (1966), initiated the contemporary debate on the meaning of the Holocaust in religious thought, both Jewish and Christian. In it he argued that after Auschwitz the belief in a redeeming God who is active in history and who will redeem mankind from its vicissitudes is no longer possible. Belief in such a God and an allegiance to the rabbinic theodicy that attempted to justify Him would imply that Hitler was part of a divine plan and that Israel was being punished for her sins. His rejection of God, however, does not entail

an end to religion or an end to Judaism, for in a meaningless world human community becomes all the more important. Consequently, Rubenstein emphasizes the importance of rituals, rites of passage, and religious community over doctrine and ethics.

Rubenstein's next work was *The Religious Imagination*, a psychoanalytic study of Midrash, which was followed by an autobiography, *Power Struggle*. In 1972 he published a slim but influential work entitled *The Cunning of History*, which argued that the Holocaust is an expression in the extreme of what was common to the mainstream of Western civilization. Rubenstein viewed the Holocaust as manifestation of major political, demographic, economic, and bureaucratic trends in contemporary civilization and therefore of importance far beyond the Jewish community. Rubenstein's later book, *La Perfidie de l'Histoire* (2005), deals with the challenge of Islamic extremism to Western civilization.

Among his other books are *The Age of Triage* (1983), and *Approaches to Auschwitz* (2003), co-authored with John K. Roth. Always a strong supporter of Israel, a life-long student of genocide and of antisemitism, Rubenstein spent the opening years of the 2000s seeking to understand the phenomenon of Islamic antisemitism as manifested particularly in Europe.

(Adapted from Richard Rubenstein at www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org)

2.

Rubenstein emerged in the 1960s as a significant writer on the meaning and impact of the Holocaust for Judaism. His first book, *After Auschwitz*, explored radical theological frontiers in Jewish thought. Rubenstein argued that the experience of the Holocaust shattered the traditional Judaic concept of God, especially as the God of the covenant with Abraham, in which the God of Israel is the God of history. Rubenstein argued that Jews could no longer advocate the notion of an omnipotent God at work in history or espouse the election of Israel as the chosen people. In the wake of the Holocaust, he believed that Jews have lost hope and there is no ultimate meaning to life.

"[A]s children of the Earth, we are undeceived concerning our destiny. We have lost all hope, consolation and illusion."

In *After Auschwitz*, Rubenstein argued that the covenant had died. He did not mean he was now an atheist,



nor that religion had to be discarded as irrelevant. However, he believed not in a transcendent God, but in God as the ground of being:

Terms like “ground” and “source” stand in contrast to the terms used for the transcendent biblical God of history who is known as a supreme king, a father, a creator, a judge, a maker. When he creates the world, he does so as do males, producing something external to himself. He remains essentially outside of and judges the creative processes he has initiated. As ground and source, God creates as does a mother, in and through her own very substance. As ground of being, God participates in all the joys and sorrows of the drama of creation which is, at the same time, the deepest expression of the divine life. God’s unchanging unitary life and that of the cosmos’ ever-changing, dynamic multiplicity ultimately reflect a single unitary reality.

Rubenstein explored what the nature and form of religious existence could possibly comprise after Auschwitz (e.g., after the experience of the Holocaust). He suggested that perhaps the way forward was to choose some form of paganism.

When his work was released in 1966, it appeared at a time when a “death of God” movement was emerging in radical theological discussions among Protestant theologians such as Gabriel Vahanian, Paul Van Buren, William Hamilton, and Thomas J. J. Altizer. Among those Protestants, the discussions centred on modern secular unbelief, the collapse of the belief in any transcendent order to the universe, and their implications for Christianity. Theologians such as Altizer felt at the time that “as ‘Death of God’ theologians we have now been joined by a distinguished Jewish theologian, Dr Richard Rubenstein.”

During the 1960s, the “Death of God” movement achieved considerable notoriety and was featured as the cover story of the April 8, 1966, edition of *Time* magazine. However, as a movement of thought among theologians in Protestant circles, it had dissipated from its novelty by the turn of the 1970s.

(Adapted from *The Death of God* at www.wikipedia.com)

3.

In his book *After Auschwitz* Rubenstein argues that it is no longer possible to sustain a belief in a supernatural deity after the events of the Nazi era. Traditional Judaism had long believed that Jewish suffering had

been justly imposed upon them by God, and yet Rubenstein had never before heard the argument being applied to the events of the modern world. He wrote: 'If one shared Rabban Johanna ben Zakai's view, one would be drawn to assert that the Jewish people had been exterminated because of their failure to comply with the Lord's commandments as these had been enjoined in the Torah.'

However, for Rubenstein, the experience of the Holocaust made this view both untenable and morally outrageous. As Cohn-Sherbok explains: 'It seemed amazing to him (Rubenstein) that Jewish theologians still subscribed to the belief in an omnipotent, beneficent God after the death camps. Traditional Jewish theology maintains that God is the ultimate actor in history – it interprets every tragedy as God's punishment for Israel's sinfulness.' But Rubenstein was unable to see how this position could be maintained without viewing Hitler as an instrument of God's will. He wrote: 'The agony of European Jewry cannot be likened to the testing of Job. To see any purpose in the death camps, the traditional believer is forced to regard the most demonic, anti-human explosion of all history as a meaningful expression of God's purposes. The idea is simply too obscene for me to accept'. Rather he argues that it is no longer possible to believe in the God of the Abrahamic covenant who rewards and punishes the Jews as the chosen people. The Holocaust has demonstrated that such a belief has no foundation, and Jews today, he contends, live in the time of the death of God. In a technical sense, based on the Kabbalah, Rubenstein maintains that God had 'died' in creating the world through the process of tzimtzum, by retracting into a void to make space for existence. Yet even though the idea of a supernatural God has been lost, Rubenstein does not call for atheism. Rather he claims that Jews can still find spiritual vitality through traditional Jewish observances such as the symbolic nature of sacrifice and the liturgy: 'For Rubenstein the archaic elements of religion are often the most meaningful and should be retained as a source of regeneration – this is particularly the case with the sacrificial system of ancient Israel and its embodiment into the Jewish liturgy' (Cohn-Sherbok). Rubenstein believes that the reasons for keeping the symbolic aspects of sacrifice were that sacrifice reminds people of moral failure; requires them to acknowledge guilt; and ultimately leads them to seek forgiveness.

It focuses the attention of the community on the fact that the people have assembled to share their failures and to resolve to live better lives. After having experienced mass murder, it is important for the



Jewish community to recognise the value of the Jewish tradition which has managed to control the darker aspects of human nature.

(Adapted from *Judaism* by Helen Gwynne-Kinsey)