

Reparations and Restitutions

Financial compensation for Jewish suffering during the Holocaust and reimbursement for Jewish property that was stolen by the Nazis. From 1953 to 1965, West Germany paid the State of Israel, Jewish survivors, and German refugees hundreds of millions of dollars in a symbolic attempt to make up for the crimes committed by the Nazis during the Holocaust.

While World War II was still raging, Jews around the world began making plans to demand financial indemnification for Holocaust victims. Just months after the war ended, the Jewish Agency made its first formal claim for reparations and property reimbursement to the four Allied powers that controlled Germany: the United States, Great Britain, France, and the Soviet Union. The agency proposed that a certain amount of Germany's money be allotted for the settlement of Jewish claims for reparations and the resettlement of Holocaust survivors in Palestine.

After the State of Israel was established in mid-1948, it became clear that the Jewish country should be authorized to represent the Jewish people in submitting restitution claims. In 1951 the Israeli authorities made a claim to the four occupying powers regarding compensation and reimbursement, based on the fact that Israel had absorbed and resettled 500,000 Holocaust survivors. They calculated that since absorption had cost 3,000 dollars a person, they were owed 1.5 billion dollars by Germany. They also figured that six billion dollars worth of Jewish property had been pillaged by the Nazis, but stressed that the Germans could never make up for what they did with any type of material recompense.

The West German government was quite willing to pay reparations to the Jewish people. Chancellor Konrad Adenauer and other politicians admitted Germany's guilt and wanted to take this chance to atone for it. In addition, they realized that paying reparations would help accelerate West Germany's acceptance by the Western powers.

Also in 1951, 22 Jewish organizations met in New York to set up the Conference on Jewish Material Claims against Germany. The purpose of the

conference was to support Israel's claims and represent the claims of Holocaust victims living outside Israel.

Within Israel, the reparations issue provoked heated debate. Many survivors strenuously opposed accepting any money from Germany, claiming that nothing could ever even begin to atone for the suffering imposed on them by the Nazis. There were many Israelis, however, who supported the talks, among them Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion. He claimed that huge amounts of money were needed to properly rehabilitate the survivors who had immigrated to Israel, and that it was only natural and fair that German money be accepted in order to further that goal. The negotiations began in March 1952. A year later, the German parliament approved the agreements made between Israel and Germany. These included Germany's commitment to pay Israel 845 million dollars in the form of goods. Of that sum, 110 million dollars would be passed on to the Claims Conference. West Germany carried out its commitment in full. The money given to the Claims Conference helped Jewish communities and institutions in 39 countries reestablish themselves.

Since 1956, the original Reparations Agreement has been greatly expanded, and over the years, Germany has paid billions of dollars to the victims of the Holocaust. In the 1990s, Jews began making claims for property stolen in Eastern Europe. Various groups also began investigating what happened to money deposited in Swiss banks by Jews outside of Switzerland who were later murdered in the Holocaust, and what happened to money deposited by various Nazis in Swiss banks. In addition, individual companies (many of them based in Germany) began to be pressured by survivor groups to compensate former forced laborers (see also Forced Labor). Among them are Deutsche Bank, Siemens, BMW, Volkswagen, Ford, and Opel. In response, early in 1999, the German government proclaimed the establishment of a fund with monies from these companies to help needy Holocaust survivors. A similar fund was set up by the Swiss, as was a Hungarian fund for compensation of Holocaust victims and their heirs. At the close of the 1990s, discussions of compensation by insurance companies that had insured Jews before the war and who were later murdered by the Nazis were held. These companies include Alliance, Axa, Generali, Zurich Financial Services Group, Winterhur,

and Balaise Insurance Group. With the help of information about Holocaust victims made available by Yad Vashem, an international commission under former US Secretary of State, Lawrence Eagleburger, has been trying to uncover the names of those who had been insured and died in the Holocaust. The World Jewish Restitution Organization was created to organize these efforts. On behalf of US citizens, the US Foreign Claims Settlement Commission reached agreements with the German government in 1998 and 1999 to compensate Holocaust victims who immigrated to the US after the war.