

Holocaust

(in Hebrew, *sho'ah*), the name used in English to refer to the systematic destruction of European Jewry at the hands of the Nazis during World War II. The word Holocaust comes from the Greek word *holokauston*, which is a translation of the Hebrew word *olah*. During Biblical times, an *olah* was a type of sacrifice to God that was totally consumed or burnt by fire. Over time, the word holocaust came to be used with reference to large-scale slaughter or destruction.

The Hebrew word *sho'ah*, which has the connotation of a whirlwind of destruction, was first used in 1940 to refer to the extermination of the Jews of Europe, in a booklet published in Jerusalem by the United Aid Committee for the Jews in Poland. The booklet was titled *Sho'at Yehudei Polin* (The Holocaust of the Jews of Poland). It included articles and eyewitness reports on the persecution of Eastern European Jewry that began when World War II broke out in September 1939. The reports were written or dictated by Jews who had seen what was going on and escaped, including some prominent Polish Jewish leaders. However, the term *sho'ah* was hardly used until the spring of 1942. Instead, many Yiddish-speaking Jews used the term *churban*, which also means destruction or catastrophe, and historically refers to the destruction of the ancient Holy Temples in Jerusalem, both in 586 BCE and in 70 CE.

In the spring of 1942 a historian in Jerusalem, Ben-Zion Dinur, used the word *sho'ah* with reference to the extermination of European Jewry, and called it a "catastrophe" that showed how different and unique the Jewish people were from the rest of the world. Other Jews in Palestine soon began using the term *sho'ah* to describe the destruction of the European Jewish community. By the 1950s, the English term Holocaust came to be employed as the term for the murder of the Jews in Europe by the Nazis. Although the term is sometimes used with reference to the murder of other groups by the Nazis, strictly speaking, those groups do not belong under the heading of the Holocaust, nor are they included in the generally accepted statistic of six million victims of the Holocaust.

