

THE HOLOCAUST AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE

by Yisrael Gutman and Chalm Schatzker



THE ZALMAN SHAZAR CENTER

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THE ZALMAN SHAZAR CENTER
THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF ISRAEL

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CHAPTER ONE:

MAJOR DEVELOPMENTS IN EUROPE BETWEEN THE TWO WORLD WARS

On November 11, 1918, the representatives of a defeated Germany and of a victorious France met in a railroad car near the town of Compiègne, in France, to sign an armistice agreement marking the end of a brutal war which had begun four years earlier, in 1914.

Question: 1. In June 1940, Hitler chose that very same railroad car as the place where he accepted the surrender of France, after his armies had occupied that country during World War II. What is significant about Hitler's choice?

In 1919, the representatives of the four Allied Powers that had participated in the war against Germany – the United States, Great Britain, France and Italy – and representatives of 23 smaller nations, convened a Peace Conference in Paris, where in June of that year a peace treaty was signed with Germany in the Hall of Mirrors of the Palace of Versailles.

Thus ended World War I, a war which caused untold destruction to both life and property; and which inaugurated the use of poison gas, tanks and submarines by which the civilian populations suffered severely as well. It is estimated that 25 million people died as a result of the war.

Although the horrors of World War I seem pale in contrast to the vast number of victims who lost their lives during World War II – over forty million – and in light of the threat of the atomic age in which we live today, at that time, World War I was considered to be the extreme example of cruelty and human suffering. By the time the war ended few people could remember the reasons for its outbreak. Names such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary, no longer seemed very important.

Many historians suggest that the underlying cause for World War I was the rivalry among the European powers; in particular the competition between the vast and wealthy empires of Great Britain and France, on

MAJOR DEVELOPMENTS IN EUROPE

the one hand, and the growing might and ambitions of Germany on the other hand. That rivalry eventually led to a struggle for control of economic wealth and colonies throughout the world.

Other historians argue that the political unrest of the period was rooted in the suppression of the smaller nations and national minorities by the great powers. Hence, it was believed that finding the solution to the problems of nationalism would thereby cure the political unrest from which Europe suffered. The "Fourteen Points," formulated by the American President, Woodrow Wilson, emphasized the principle of national self-determination as the basis for a just and lasting peace.

The Fourteen Points

The program of the world's peace, therefore, is our program; and that program, the only possible program, as we see it, is this:

I. Open covenants of peace, openly arrived at, after which there shall be no private international understandings of any kind but diplomacy shall proceed always frankly and in the public view.

II. Absolute freedom of navigation upon the seas, outside territorial waters, alike in peace and in war, except as the seas may be closed in whole or in part by international action for the enforcement of international covenants.

III. The removal, so far as possible, of all economic barriers and the establishment of an equality of trade conditions among all the nations consenting to the peace and associating themselves for its maintenance.

IV. Adequate guarantees given and taken that national armaments will be reduced to the lowest point consistent with domestic safety.

V. A free, open-minded, and absolutely impartial adjustment of all colonial claims, based upon a strict observance of the principle that in determining all such questions of sovereignty the interest of the populations concerned must have equal weight with the equitable claims of the government whose title is to be determined.

VI. The evacuation of all Russian territory and such a settlement of all questions affecting Russia as will secure the best and freest cooperation of the other nations of the world in obtaining for her an unhampered and unembarrassed opportunity for the independent determination of her own political development and national policy and assure her of a sincere welcome into the society of free nations under institutions of her own choosing; and, more than a welcome, assistance also of every kind that she may need and may herself desire. The treatment accorded Russia by her