The Holocaust: A History

HISTORY OF THE HOLOCAUST: AN OVERVIEW

On January 20, 1942, an extraordinary 90-minute meeting took place in a lakeside villa in the wealthy Wannsee district of Berlin. Fifteen high-ranking Nazi party and German government leaders gathered to coordinate logistics for carrying out "the final solution of the Jewish question." Chairing the meeting was SS Lieutenant General Reinhard Heydrich, head of the powerful Reich Security Main Office, a central police agency that included the Secret State Police (the Gestapo). Heydrich convened the meeting on the basis of a memorandum he had received six months earlier from Adolf Hitler's deputy, Hermann Göring, confirming his authorization to implement the "Final Solution."

The "Final Solution" was the Nazi regime's code name for the deliberate, planned mass murder of all European Jews. During the Wannsee meeting German government officials discussed "extermination" without hesitation or qualm. Heydrich calculated that 11 million European Jews from more than 20 countries would be killed under this heinous plan.

During the months before the Wannsee Conference, special units made up of SS, the elite guard of the Nazi state, and police personnel, known as *Einsatzgruppen*, slaughtered Jews in mass shootings on the territory of the Soviet Union that the Germans had occupied. Six weeks before the Wannsee meeting, the Nazis began to murder Jews at Chelmno, an agricultural estate located in that part of Poland annexed to Germany. Here SS and police personnel used sealed vans into which they pumped carbon monoxide gas to suffocate their victims. The Wannsee meeting served to sanction, coordinate, and expand the implementation of the "Final Solution" as state policy.

During 1942, trainload after trainload of Jewish men, women, and children were transported from countries all over Europe to Auschwitz, Treblinka, and four other major killing centers in German-occupied Poland. By year's end, about 4 million Jews were dead. During World War II (1939–1945), the Germans and their collaborators killed or caused the deaths of up to 6 million Jews. Hundreds of Jewish communities in Europe, some centuries old, disappeared forever. To convey the unimaginable, devastating scale of destruction, postwar writers referred to the murder of the European Jews as the "Holocaust."

Centuries of religious prejudice against Jews in Christian Europe, reinforced by modern political antisemitism developing from a complex mixture of extreme nationalism, financial insecurity, fear of communism, and so-called race science, provide the backdrop for the Holocaust. Hitler and other Nazi ideologues regarded Jews as a dangerous "race" whose very existence threatened the biological purity and strength of the "superior Aryan race." To secure the assistance of thousands of individuals to implement the "Final Solution," the Nazi regime could and did exploit existing prejudice against Jews in Germany and the other countries that were conquered by or allied with Germany during World War II.

"While not all victims were Jews, all Jews were victims," Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel has written. "Jews were destined for annihilation solely because they were born Jewish. They were doomed not because of something they had done or proclaimed or acquired but because of who they were, sons and daughters of Jewish people. As such they were sentenced to death collectively and individually...."

SUMMARY OF THE HISTORY OF THE HOLOCAUST IN TWO MAIN SECTIONS: 1933–1939 AND 1939–1945

1933–1939

On January 30, 1933, Adolf Hitler was named chancellor, the most powerful position in the German government, by the aged President Hindenburg, who hoped Hitler could lead the nation out of its grave political and economic crisis. Hitler was the leader of the right-wing National Socialist German Workers Party (called the "Nazi party" for short). It was, by 1933, one of the strongest parties in Germany, even though—reflecting the country's multiparty system—the Nazis had won only a plurality of 33 percent of the votes in the 1932 elections to the German parliament (Reichstag).

Once in power, Hitler moved quickly to end German democracy. He convinced his cabinet to invoke emergency clauses of the constitution that permitted the suspension of individual freedoms of press, speech, and assembly. Special security forces—the Gestapo, the Storm Troopers (SA), and the SS—murdered or arrested leaders of opposition political parties (Communists, socialists, and liberals). The Enabling Act of March 23, 1933—forced through a Reichstag already purged of many political opponents—gave dictatorial powers to Hitler.

Also in 1933, the Nazis began to put into practice their racial ideology. The Nazis believed that the Germans were "racially superior" and that there was a struggle for survival between them and "inferior races." They saw Jews, Roma (Gypsies), and the handicapped as a serious biological threat to the purity of the "German (Aryan[1]) Race," what they called the "master race."

Jews, who numbered about 525,000 in Germany (less than one percent of the total population in 1933), were the principal target of Nazi hatred. The Nazis identified Jews as a race and defined this race as "inferior." They also spewed hate-mongering propaganda that unfairly blamed Jews for Germany's economic depression and the country's defeat in World War I (1914–18).

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1 The term "Aryan" originally referred to peoples speaking Indo-European languages. The Nazis perverted its meaning to support racist ideas by viewing those of Germanic background as prime examples of Aryan stock, which they considered racially superior. For the Nazis, the typical Aryan was blond, blue-eyed, and tall.

In 1933, new German laws forced Jews out of their civil service jobs, university and law court positions, and other areas of public life. In April 1933, a boycott of Jewish businesses was instituted. In 1935, laws proclaimed at Nuremberg made Jews second-class citizens. These Nuremberg Laws defined Jews, not by their religion or by how they wanted to identify themselves, but by the religious affiliation of their grandparents. Between 1937 and 1939, new anti-Jewish regulations segregated Jews further and made daily life very difficult for them: Jews could not attend public schools; go to theaters, cinemas, or vacation resorts; or reside or even walk in certain sections of German cities.

Also between 1937 and 1939, Jews increasingly were forced from Germany's economic life: The Nazis either seized Jewish businesses and properties outright or forced Jews to sell them at bargain prices. In November 1938, the Nazis organized a riot (pogrom), known as *Kristallnacht* (the "Night of Broken Glass"). This attack against German and Austrian Jews included the physical destruction of synagogues and Jewish-owned stores, the arrest of Jewish men, the vandalization of homes, and the murder of individuals.

Although Jews were the main target of Nazi hatred, the Nazis persecuted other groups they viewed as racially or genetically "inferior." Nazi racial ideology was buttressed by scientists who advocated "selective breeding" (eugenics) to "improve" the human race. Laws passed between 1933 and 1935 aimed to reduce the future number of genetic "inferiors" through involuntary sterilization programs: 320,000 to 350,000 individuals judged physically or mentally handicapped were subjected to surgical or radiation procedures so they could not have children. Supporters of sterilization also argued that the handicapped burdened the community with the costs of their care. Many of Germany's 30,000 Roma (Gypsies) were also eventually sterilized and prohibited, along with Blacks, from intermarrying with Germans. About 500 children of mixed African-German backgrounds were also sterilized.[2] New laws combined traditional prejudices with the racism of the Nazis, which defined Roma, by "race," as "criminal and asocial."

Another consequence of Hitler's ruthless dictatorship in the 1930s was the arrest of political opponents and trade unionists and others the Nazis labeled "undesirables" and "enemies of the state." Some 5,000 to 15,000 homosexuals were imprisoned in concentration camps; under the 1935 Nazi-revised criminal code, the mere denunciation of a man as "homosexual" could result in arrest, trial, and conviction. Jehovah's Witnesses, who numbered at least 25,000 in Germany, were banned as an organization as early as April 1933, because the beliefs of this religious group prohibited them from swearing any oath to the state or serving in the German military. Their literature was confiscated, and they lost jobs, unemployment benefits, pensions, and all social welfare benefits. Many Witnesses were sent to prisons and concentration camps in Nazi Germany, and their children were sent to juvenile detention homes and orphanages.

2 These children, called "the Rhineland bastards" by Germans, were the offspring of German women and African soldiers from French colonies who were stationed in the 1920s in the Rhineland, a demilitarized zone the Allies established after World War I as a buffer between Germany and western Europe.

Between 1933 and 1936, thousands of people, mostly political prisoners, were imprisoned in concentration camps, while several thousand German Roma (Gypsies) were confined in special municipal camps. The first systematic roundups of German and Austrian[3] Jews occurred after *Kristallnacht*, when approximately 30,000 Jewish men were deported to Dachau and other concentration camps, and several hundred Jewish women were sent to local jails. The wave of arrests in 1938 also included several thousand German and Austrian Roma (Gypsies).

Between 1933 and 1939, about half the German-Jewish population and more than two-thirds of Austrian Jews (1938–39) fled Nazi persecution. They emigrated mainly to the United States, Palestine, elsewhere in Europe (where many would be later trapped by Nazi conquests during the war), Latin America, and Japanese-occupied Shanghai (which required no visas for entry). Jews who remained under Nazi rule were either unwilling to uproot themselves or unable to obtain visas, sponsors in host countries, or funds for emigration. Most foreign countries, including the United States, Canada, Britain, and France, were unwilling to admit very large numbers of refugees.

1939–1945

On September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland and World War II began. Within weeks, the Polish army was defeated, and the Nazis began their campaign to destroy Polish culture and enslave the Polish people, whom they viewed as "subhuman." Killing Polish leaders was the first step: German soldiers carried out massacres of university professors, artists, writers, politicians, and many Catholic priests. To create new living space for the "superior Germanic race," large segments of the Polish population were resettled, and German families moved into the emptied lands. Other Poles, including many Jews, were imprisoned in concentration camps. The Nazis also "kidnapped" as many as 50,000 "Aryan-looking" Polish children from their parents and took them to Germany to be adopted by German families. Many of these children were later rejected as not capable of Germanization and were sent to special children's camps where some died of starvation, lethal injection, and disease.

As the war began in 1939, Hitler initialed an order to kill institutionalized, handicapped patients deemed "incurable." Special commissions of physicians reviewed questionnaires filled out by all state hospitals and then decided if a patient should be killed. The doomed were then transferred to six institutions in Germany and Austria where specially constructed gas chambers were used to kill them. After public protests in 1941, the Nazi leadership continued this "euthanasia" program in secret. Babies, small children, and other victims were thereafter killed by lethal injection and pills and by forced starvation.

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3 On March 11, 1938, Hitler sent his army into Austria, and on March 13, the incorporation (Anschluss) of Austria with the German empire (Reich) was proclaimed in Vienna. Most of the population welcomed the Anschluss and expressed their fervor in widespread riots and attacks against the Austrian Jews numbering 180,000 (90 percent of whom lived in Vienna).