

# The Holocaust

## Part A – Who was Adolph Hitler and how did he rise to power?

Adolph Hitler was born in a small town in Austria in 1889. He dropped out of high school and failed to make a living as an artist. When World War I broke out (1914-1919) he volunteered for the German army and was twice awarded the Iron Cross, a medal for bravery. At the end of the war Hitler settled in Munich, Germany. In the 1920's he joined a right-wing political group that believed Germany had to overturn the Treaty of Versailles (which found Germany guilty for starting World War I) and fight against communism. The group later called itself the **National Socialist German Workers' Party, called Nazi for short.**

The Nazi party was supported by people in both the middle and lower classes. This fascist party adopted the symbol of the **swastika** (or hooked cross). They set up a private militia called the storm troopers or Brownshirts. Within a short time, Hitler's success as an organizer and a dynamic speaker led him to be chosen as der Führer, or leader of the Nazi party.

In 1923 Hitler's party tried to seize power in Munich. The attempt failed and Hitler was arrested. He was tried for treason but sympathetic judges sentenced him to five years. In fact, he only served nine months in jail. While in prison he wrote **Mein Kampf** (*My Struggle*). His book laid out his goals and plans for Germany. He wrote that the blond and blue-eyed **Aryans** of Germany were a master race. He stated that **non-Aryan races**, such as Jews, Slavs, and Gypsies were inferior or subhuman. He believed that the Treaty of Versailles was an outrage and he vowed to return to Germany the lands taken from them after the war. He also declared that Germany was overcrowded and needed more lebensraum, or living space. He vowed to make more space by conquering Eastern Europe and Russia.

Hitler was released from prison in 1924. When the Great Depression came in America the Germany economy also stopped. Factories stopped production and banks closed. By 1932, nearly 6 million Germans (nearly 30% of the working population) were unemployed. Frightened and confused the German population turned to Hitler and his party for security and strong leadership.

Adolph Hitler came to power legally. At first he was backed by Conservative party leaders who believed that they could control Hitler for their own greed. They asked President Paul von Hindenburg to name Hitler chancellor. Only Hitler, they said, could stand up to the strong Communist party in Germany. Once in office Hitler acted quickly to strengthen his position. He called for new elections but six days before the election a mysterious fire destroyed the Reichstag building where the German parliament met. The Nazis blamed the Communists. The Nazi party won the election by a slim majority.

## Part B – The Holocaust begins

In November 1938, a 17-year-old German Jewish boy, Herschel Grynszpan, was visiting his uncle in Paris. While he was there he received a postcard. It said that after living in Germany for 27 years, his father had been deported to his native Poland. On November 7, wishing to avenge his father's deportation by the Nazi party Grynszpan shot an employee of the German Embassy in Paris.

When the Nazi leaders heard about this shooting they launched a violent attack on the Jewish community. On November 9<sup>th</sup>, 1938 Nazi storm troopers attacked Jewish homes, businesses and synagogues across Germany and murdered about 100 Jews in retaliation. An American in the city of Leipzig wrote, "*Jewish shop windows by the hundreds were systematically... smashed... The main streets of the city were a positive litter of shattered plate glass.*" It is for this reason that the night of November 9<sup>th</sup> became known as **Kristallnacht, or Night of Broken Glass.**

Although Jews were less than one percent of the population, the Nazi's used them as scapegoats for all of Germany's troubles since World War I. However, Kristallnacht marked a major escalation in the Nazi policy of Jewish persecution. The future of Jews in Germany was grim.

## Part C – The "Jewish Problem"

After Kristallnacht many Jews realized that the violence would continue. At first Hitler believed that the emigration of Jews from Germany was a solution to his "Jewish Problem." The Nazi party sped up the documentation process. Getting other countries to accept the German Jews was a problem for Hitler. France admitted around 25,000 Jews but would not take any more. The British, who had accepted 80,000, feared anti-Semitism in their own country if these numbers increased. About 40,000 Jews fled to South America but in 1938 the doors were closed to them. The United States took in around 100,000 Jews, including Albert Einstein. However many Americans wanted the U.S. doors closed. Germany's foreign minister stated "*We all want to get rid of our Jews. The difficulty is that no country wishes to receive them.*"

By the time World War II began in September, 1939, Hitler changed his plans. Emigration had not worked so he ordered Jews in all off the countries he controlled to be moved into certain cities within Poland. In those cities they were herded into dismal, overcrowded **ghettos**, or segregated Jewish areas. The Nazis sealed off the ghettos with barbed wire and stone walls. They wanted the Jews inside to starve or die from disease. Even under these horrible circumstances the Jewish people hung-on. They smuggled in food and other needed items. In the middle of the chaos Jews struggled to keep their traditions. Ghetto theaters produced plays and concerts. Teachers taught lessons in secret schools. Scholars kept records so that one day people would find out the truth.

Once in power Hitler demanded *dictatorial or absolute power* for four years. He turned Germany into a *totalitarian* state. He banned all other political parties and had his opponents arrested. He created an elite, black-uniformed unit called the SS (Schutzstaffel or protection squad) who were loyal only to Hitler. In 1933 the Nazis made persecution a government policy. One of the first laws passed was that Jews were forbidden to hold any public office. In 1934 the SS (also known as the **Gestapo**) arrested and murdered hundreds of Hitler's enemies, including the leaders of the Brownshirts. This reign of terror shocked the German public into total obedience.

The Nazis quickly took command of the economy. In 1935 the Nuremberg Laws were passed depriving Jews of their rights to German citizenship, jobs and property. To make it easier for the Nazis to identify them, Jews had to wear a bright yellow star attached to their clothing. In addition new laws banned strikes, dissolved labor unions and gave his government full authority over business and labor. Hitler put millions of Germans to work. They constructed new factories, built highways (the autobahn), manufactured weapons and served in the army. As a result unemployment dropped from about 6 million to 1.5 million in 1936.

Hitler wanted more than economic and political power – he wanted control over every aspect of German life. Hitler created a powerful propaganda campaign by controlling the press, radio, movie industry and the arts. Churches were forbidden to criticize the Nazi party. Children had to join the Hitler Youth (boys) or the League of German Girls. This was only the first step towards the Holocaust – the mass slaughter of civilians, especially Jews.



## Part D – The “Final Solution.”

Hitler soon grew impatient waiting for the Jews to die in the ghettos. He decided to take a more positive action towards their destruction. His plan was called the “Final Solution.” It was actually a plan of **genocide**, the systematic killing of an entire people.

To protect the racial purity of his Aryan race, Hitler not only had to eliminate the Jews, but other races, nationalities, or groups he viewed as “inferior” or “subhuman.” They included gypsies, Poles, Russians, homosexuals, the insane, the disabled, and the incurably ill but the Nazis focused especially on the Jews.

As the Nazi armies swept across Eastern Europe the SS and some thousands of collaborators rounded up Jews – men, women, young children, even babies – and took them to isolated spots. Then they shot them and dumped their bodies into pits. Jewish people in the ghettos, not killed by the SS death squads, were sent to concentration camps (slave-labor prisons). These camps were located mainly in Germany and Poland. Later on in the war the Nazis would build camps in other countries.

The prisoners worked seven days a week as slaves for the SS or German businesses. Guards severely beat or killed their prisoners for not working fast enough. With meals of thin soup, a scrap of bread, and potato peelings, most prisoners lost around 50 pounds in the first month. One survivor recalled that *“hunger was so intense that if a bit of soup spilled over, prisoners would dig their spoons into the mud and stuff the mess into their mouths.”*

The “Final Solution” officially reached its final stage in early 1942. The Nazis had built extermination camps with gas chambers for mass murder. The first six death camps were in Poland. The first, Chelmno, actually began operation in late 1941. The huge gas chambers in these camps could kill as many as 6,000 in a day.

When prisoners arrived at the largest of these death camps, **Auschwitz**, they were paraded before a committee of SS doctors. With a wave of a hand, these doctors separated the strong (mostly men) from the weak. The weak would die that day. Those chosen to die, mostly women, young children and the elderly, were told to undress for a shower. They were led into a chamber with fake showerheads and the doors were closed behind them. The prisoners were then poisoned with **cyanide gas** that poured from the fake showerheads. Later, to speed up the process of burying the dead bodies, the Nazis installed **crematoriums**, or ovens, to burn the corpses.

Nazi doctors, such as the notorious Josef Mengele, used many concentration camp prisoners as guinea pigs for their experiments. To promote “racial purity,” doctors tested sterilization methods on some prisoners. Doctors infected other prisoners with typhus and other deadly diseases to see how long they could survive. To practice surgery, student doctors would operate on prisoners without anesthesia. In the hands of the Nazis, even medicine became an instrument of pain and destruction.

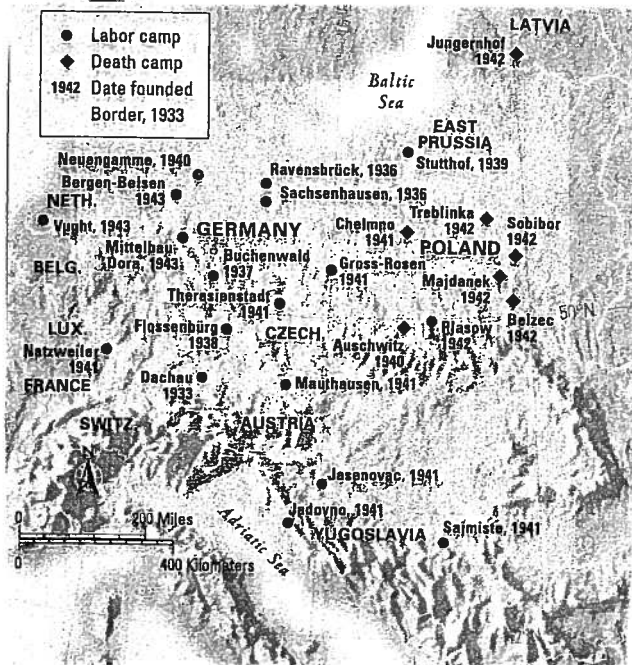
Not all Jews went without resistance. In the Warsaw ghetto the 700 members of the Jewish Fighting Organization were among those who fought for their lives. In April 1943, most of these young people lost their lives while battling Nazi tanks and troops who were systematically destroying their make-shift homes.

Even in the death camps, Jews rose up against the Nazis. In August 1943, in Treblinka, Poland, a small group of Jews revolted. Breaking into the armory, they stole guns and grenades. They attacked the guards and set fire to the gas chambers. Most of these brave fighters died. They had paid the highest price possible to combat the Nazi atrocities.

Six million Jews died in the Nazi massacres and the death camps. Fewer than 4 million European Jews survived the horrors of the Holocaust. Many had help from non-Jewish people who were against the Nazis' treatment of the Jews. People such as businessmen and religious leaders risked their lives by hiding Jews or by helping them escape to neutral countries such as Switzerland or Sweden. Those who survived these camps were changed forever by what they had seen. Elie Wiesel was 15 years old when he entered Auschwitz and was a worker in the camp, forced to perform hard labor and witness the slaughter. In his book *Night*, he wrote *"Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky. Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever... Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul; and turned my dreams to dust.... Never."*

### Estimates of Jews killed by the Nazis.

Country/Region	Original Jewish Population	Jews Killed
<b>Poland</b>	<b>3,300,000</b>	<b>3,000,000</b>
<b>Soviet Union</b>	<b>2,850,000</b>	<b>1,252,000</b>
<b>Hungary</b>	<b>650,000</b>	<b>450,000</b>
<b>Romania</b>	<b>600,000</b>	<b>300,000</b>
<b>Germany/Austria</b>	<b>240,000</b>	<b>200,000</b>



## Memories

Deep in your heart is where I reside  
listen, you'll hear all the tears that I cried  
I am the soul of millions who've died  
before you were given your birth

A part of your being, a piece of your past  
women and children, so brutally gassed  
This is my legacy, please make it last  
and tell all the people on earth

Memories as they grow older, tend to grow colder  
and then disappear –  
The burden is now on your shoulders,  
you have a message, you must make them hear

Please never forget me,  
I am the spirit that must live on  
and though you've never met me,  
you must remember me now that I'm gone

Nothing has changed, I can still hear the hate  
suffering in silence and tempting your fate  
You must speak out now, before it's too late  
You can't close your eyes and pretend

Think of the grandfather you never kissed,  
all of the relatives that you have missed  
You must raise your voice, and then raise your fist  
and tell the world never again!

Memories as they grow older, tend to grow colder  
and then disappear –  
The burden is now on your shoulders,  
you have a message, you must make them hear