

# The Holocaust

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

He 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 in 1914, he volunteered for the Germany army. He was twice awarded the **Iron Cross** for bravery.

At the end of the war, Hitler settled in Munich. By the 1920's, he had become politically motivated due to the post-war despair among the Germany people. He joined a right-wing political group who advocated for the overturn of the Treaty of Versailles and stopping the spread of communism from Russia. This group later called itself the **National Socialist German Workers Party, Nazi** for short.

The Nazi party was supported by both the middle and lower classes. This **fascist party** adopted the swastika (hooked cross) as its symbol. They set up a private militia known as the "**Brownshirts.**" Hitler rose to power within the party ranks. He was an excellent organizer and public speaker. This led him to be chosen as **der Führer** (father of the Nazi party).

In 1923, the Nazi party tried to seize power but the attempt failed and Hitler was arrested. He was tried for treason but sympathetic judges only jailed him for five years. In fact, he only served nine months in jail. While in prison he wrote **Mein Kampf** (*My Struggle*). His book laid out the future plans for Germany. He wrote that the blond, blue-eyed **Aryans** of Germany were to be the master race. Non-Aryan races such as the Jews, Slavs, and Gypsies were inferior or subhuman. He stated that the Treaty of Versailles was an outrage and he vowed to liberate all of the German lands taken away. He believed Germany was overcrowded so he proposed making more space for his superior race by conquering Eastern Europe and parts of Russia.

Hitler was released from prison in 1924. When the **Great Depression** came, the German economy also stopped. By 1932, nearly six millions Germans (30% of the working population) were unemployed. Factories stopped production and banks closed across Germany. Hitler's political ideals and popularity grew at a great rate as he vowed to change the Germany economy.

Adolf Hitler came to power legally! At first he was backed by the Conservative party who believed that they could control Hitler for their own greed. They asked President von Hindenburg to name Hitler chancellor. Only Hitler, they said, could stand up to the communist party that was rapidly growing in Germany. Once in office Hitler began to strengthen his position. He called for new elections but just six days before the election a "mysterious" fire destroyed the Germany parliament building (**Reichstag**). The Nazi party blamed the communists and Hitler's Nazi party won the election by a slim majority.

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 secret police force called the **SS (Schutzstaffel** or protection squad). They had to pledge total loyalty to Hitler.

In 1933, the Nazis made **persecution a government policy**. One of the first laws was that Jews were now forbidden to hold any public office. In 1934, the SS (also known as **Gestapo**), arrested and murdered hundreds of Hitler's enemies, including the leaders of the Brownshirts. This reign of terror shocked the Germany public into total obedience to the Nazi Party and Adolf Hitler.

The Nazi party quickly took total control of Germany. In 1935, the **Nuremberg Laws** were passed depriving Jews of their rights to Germany citizenship, jobs and property. For identification purposes, Jews had to wear a **bright yellow star** (showing **Jude**) on their clothing.

These new laws also banned strikes and dissolved all labor unions. The Nazi government now had full power over both business and labor. Hitler began to put millions of unemployed Germans to work. He built new heavy industry factories, highways (**autobahn**), and factories for military weapons. He started conscription, a military draft for all eligible males. By 1936, unemployment had dropped from 6 million to 1.5 million.

Hitler wanted more than economic and political power – he wanted to control every aspect of German life. His powerful propaganda campaign controlled the press, radio, movie industry, and the arts. Churches were forbidden to criticize the Nazi party and children had to join the **Hitler Youth** (boys) or **League of German Girls**.

## **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 that his father. After living in Germany for 27 years, had been deported by the Nazi party back to his native Poland. On November 7<sup>th</sup>, avenging his father's deportation, he shot an employee of the German Embassy in Paris.

The Nazi party violently retaliated against the Jewish communities. On November 9<sup>th</sup> 1938, German militants attacked Jewish homes, synagogues, and businesses across Germany. About 100 Jews were killed. An American who was in the city of Leipzig at the time wrote:

***“Jewish shop windows by the hundreds were systematically smashed. The main streets of the city were a positive litter of shattered plate glass.”***

This night will become known as **Kristallnacht**, or the **Night of Broken Glass**.

Although Jews were less than 1% of the total German population, the Nazi party used them as scapegoats for all of Germany's troubles since World War I. Kristallnacht marked a major escalation in the Nazi party policy towards Jewish persecution. The future of Jews in Germany was grim.

## **Part C – The “Jewish Problem.”**

At first, the Nazi part believed that **deportation** of Jews from Germany was a solution. They sped up the documentation process but getting other countries to accept German Jews became a problem for Hitler. France admitted about 25,000 Jews but then stopped admitting any more. Britain took in about 80,000 Jews but feared that their own anti-Semitism would increase. About 40,000 Jews fled to various parts of South America until these escape-doors were closed. The United States allowed around 100,000 Jews to seek exile (including **Albert Einstein**) but many Americans also wanted the doors to close on the Jews. Germany's foreign minister stated:

***“We want to get rid of our Jews. The difficulty is that no country wishes to receive them.”***

During these persecutions, Hitler was readying his plans for expansion and occupation of Europe. When he started World War II in September 1939, he changed his plans of deportation for Jews. He began to create **ghettos** in his newly occupied cities in **Poland**. The Nazi party sealed off the ghettos with barbed wire and stone walls creating segregated Jewish-only areas. They wanted to have these captured Jews starve or die-off from disease. Even under these horrible conditions, the Jewish people continued to live. They smuggled in food and other supplies. They kept their religious and social traditions in secrecy. Ghetto theaters produced plays and concerts. Teachers taught lessons in secret, and scribes recorded every day's situations so that one day people would find out the truth about the events taking place.

## **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 approach towards their destruction. It was a plan of mass genocide, the systematic killing of an entire population, the **“Final Solution.”**

To protect the racial purity of his Aryan people, Hitler also included the elimination of other races, nationalities, or groups of people he viewed as “inferior” or “subhuman.” They includes gypsies, Poles, Russians, homosexuals, the insane, the disabled, and the incurably ill. However, the main focus was on the extermination of the Jewish race.

As the Nazi armies swept across Eastern Europe, the SS and thousands of Nazi **collaborators**, rounded up as many Jews as possible (men, women, young children and babies). They took them to isolated areas, shot them and dumped their bodies into open pits. The Jewish people in the ghettos were rounded up by the SS and sent to **concentration camps** that served as slave-labor prisons. These camps were located in remote areas of Germany and Poland. Later on during the war, camps would be built in other German occupied 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:

***“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 last stage in 1942. The Nazis had now **built extermination camps using gas chambers** to commit their mass executions. The first six **“death camps”** were in Poland. The first, Chelmno, began operation by late 1941. The gas chambers in these death camps could kill as many as **6,000 people each day!**

When prisoners arrived at the largest of these death camp, **Auschwitz**, they were first 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 out of the fake showerheads. Later on, to speed up the process of removing the dead bodies, the Nazis installed crematoriums or ovens, to burn and incinerate the corpses.

Many Nazi doctors, including the notorious **Josef Mengele**, used prisoners as guinea pigs for their experiments. To promote “racial purity” doctors tested sterilization methods on some prisoners. Others were infected with typhus or other deadly diseases, just to see how long they could survive. To practice surgery, student doctors would operate on prisoners without using anesthesia. At the hands of the Nazis, even medicine became an instrument of pain and destruction!

Not all Jews went to the camps without resistance. In the Warsaw ghetto the 700 members of the **Jewish Fighting Organization** fought for their lives. In April 1943, most of these young men and women died while battling the Nazi tanks and soldiers who were systematically destroying their make-shift homes.

Even in the “death camps” Jews rose up against the Nazis. In August 1943, at **Treblinka** in Poland, a small group of Jews broke into the armory and stole guns and grenades. They attacked the guards and set fire to the gas chambers. Most of these prisoners 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 four million European Jews survived the horrors of the **Holocaust**. Many had help from non-Jewish people who opposed the Nazi treatments. Businessmen and religious leaders risked their lives by hiding Jews or helping them escape to neutral countries such as Switzerland and Sweden. Those who survived the camps were changed forever. **Elie Wiesel** was only fifteen when he entered Auschwitz and was a worker who was forced to perform hard labor and the mass slaughtering of his fellow people. In his book **Night**, he wrote

*“Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreathes 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.”*

When the Allies began to liberate the hidden concentration camps in late 1944 and 1945, it was only then that the world began to see Hitler’s genocide and the atrocities his Nazi party had committed.

<b>Estimates of Jews killed by the Nazis</b>		
<b>Country/Region</b>	<b>Original Jewish Population</b>	<b>Jews Killed</b>
<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>