

The Holocaust, Part One: The Rise of Adolf Hitler and World War II

By History.com



The first in a two-part series

The word "Holocaust" comes from the Greek words "holos" (whole) and "kaustos" (burned). The term was historically used to describe a sacrificial offering burned on an altar.

Since 1945, however, the word has become synonymous with one of the darkest chapters in human history: the mass murder of some 6 million European Jews by the German Nazi regime during World War II. Millions of others from targeted groups were also put to death, including Roma (sometimes negatively called Gypsies), homosexuals and people with disabilities. Jews, though, were the Nazis' main targets and victims.

To Nazi leader Adolf Hitler, Jews were an inferior race. He and his followers considered Jews an alien threat to German racial purity and society. Once he came to power, he was able to turn his nightmarish ideas into deadly action. Hitler's "Final Solution" — now known as the Holocaust — happened under the cover of world war. As world powers concentrated on battlefronts, Nazis constructed mass killing centers in the concentration camps of Nazi-occupied Europe.

Historical anti-Semitism and Hitler's rise to power

Anti-Semitism, or anti-Jewish bigotry, had roots in Europe long before Hitler's rise. Followers of the Jewish faith were often viewed as strange outsiders by their Christian neighbors. However, an intellectual movement in the 17th and 18th centuries, called the Enlightenment, emphasized religious tolerance. In the 19th century, Napoleon and other European rulers passed laws ending official discrimination against Jews. But anti-Jewish feelings did not end. In many places, hateful attitudes became less about religious differences and more about racial hostility.

The roots of Hitler's vicious brand of anti-Semitism are unclear. Born in Austria in 1889, he served in the German army during World War I, which began in 1914. After its defeat in 1918, Germany was left with a shattered government and ruined economy. Like many anti-Semites in Germany, Hitler blamed the Jews for the country's downfall. This ignored the fact that some 100,000 German Jews fought for their country during the war.

Soon after the World War I ended, Hitler joined a political group that became the National Socialist German Workers' Party. It was better known to English speakers as the Nazis. In 1923, Hitler was found guilty of treason for his leadership role in an attempt to overthrow the government of Bavaria, a German state.

While imprisoned, Hitler wrote the book "Mein Kampf"—"My Struggle"—in which he predicted a European war that would result in "the extermination of the Jewish race in Germany." Hitler was obsessed with the idea of the superiority of the "pure" German race, which he called "Aryan." He also argued for the need for "Lebensraum," or living space, for that race to expand.

In the years after he was released from prison, Hitler took advantage of the weakness of his political opponents. He built his party's power. On January 20, 1933, he was named chancellor of Germany. The next year he anointed himself "der Führer"—Germany's supreme ruler. Huge Nazi rallies drove home the message of party strength.

The twin goals of racial purity and territorial expansion were the core of Hitler's worldview. After 1933, they became the driving forces behind his foreign and domestic policy.

Nazis start the "Aryanization" of Germany

The Nazis opened the first concentration camp at Dachau, Germany, in March 1933. Many of its prisoners were the Nazis' political enemies. By July that year, such camps held some 27,000 prisoners. Like the network of labor and prison camps that followed, Dachau was under the control of Heinrich Himmler. Himmler served as head of the elite Nazi guard, the Schutzstaffel (SS). He later became chief of the German police, or Gestapo.

In 1933, Jews in Germany numbered around 525,000, about 1 percent of Germany's population. During the next six years, Nazis undertook the "Aryanization" of Germany. They dismissed Jews from civil service. They closed Jewish-owned businesses and stripped Jewish lawyers and doctors of their clients. Under the Nuremberg Laws of 1935, anyone with three or four Jewish grandparents was considered a Jew. Those with two Jewish grandparents were designated Mischlinge, or half-breeds.

Under these laws, Jews of all ages became routine targets for discrimination and persecution. This came to a head on Kristallnacht, or the "night of broken glass," in November 1938. Synagogues, Jewish buildings of worship, were burned and windows in Jewish shops were smashed. Some 100 Jews were killed and thousands more arrested. Between 1933 and 1939, hundreds of thousands of Jews fled Germany if they could. Those who remained lived in a constant state of uncertainty and fear.

World War II begins

In September 1939, the German army invaded the western half of Poland, marking the beginning of World War II. German forces soon forced tens of thousands of Polish Jews from their homes. They were sent to Jewish areas in Polish cities known as ghettos where they were surrounded by high walls and barbed wire. These virtual prison camps suffered widespread poverty and hunger. In addition, overpopulation made them breeding grounds for deadly diseases like typhus.

In the fall of 1939, Nazi officials began identifying about 70,000 Germans with physical and mental disabilities. Hitler planned for them to be systematically gassed to death in the so-called euthanasia program. After German religious leaders protested, Hitler officially ended the program in August 1941, but it continued in secret. By the war's end in 1945, some 275,000 people with disabilities had been killed. In hindsight, it seems clear that this program served as a test run for the Holocaust.