

# THE TRAGEDY OF THE HOLOCAUST



*Entrance to the Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial*

## Unit Overview

As the Allies raced toward Berlin in 1945, they encountered one of the most horrific aspects of Nazi extremism. Adolf Hitler had condemned all people that he believed to be inferior to extermination in state-sponsored death camps. Although some information surrounding their purpose had been leaked to the outside world, no one was prepared for the cruelty and inhumanity of what has become known as the **Holocaust**, a Greek term meaning sacrificed by fire. Let's see how it all happened.

**STOP:** Answer Section A Questions

## Hitler's Philosophy of Racism

As a young man growing up in **Austria**, the convictions of Adolf Hitler were molded by his exposure to extreme Austro-German nationalists, who saw themselves as a superior people with exceptional leadership skills. Along with Vienna's mayor **Karl Lueger**, he favored a union between Germany and Austria based on the violent exclusion of certain elements of society. These included Jews, Slavs, Gypsies, Jehovah Witnesses, communists and homosexuals. By the time he moved to **Munich** in 1913, Hitler was convinced that the Jews were the most serious threat to German culture, unity and progress. The defeat of Germany in World War I further solidified his position, and he blamed the loss of the war solely on this group. Hitler determined that to be Jewish was not a religious choice but a scientific classification identified by certain physical characteristics. In **Mein Kampf** (My Struggle), written in 1925, Hitler referred to northern Europeans, including Germans, as the **Aryans**, a master race destined to rule the world due to their intellectual and physical superiority. He reasoned that this group could only achieve greatness through **ethnic** purity. Therefore, those people that were considered inferior had to be destroyed. Therefore, Hitler directed the Nazi Party to pursue a course of political action that would accomplish this goal.

Timeline of Events	
1933	Fire at the Reichstag Dachua opened
1935	Nuremberg Laws
1936	Berlin Olympics
1938	Kristallnacht
1942	Wannsee Conference
1944	Death Marches and Camp Evacuations
1945	Allied Liberation

**STOP:** Answer Section B Questions

## Anti-Semitism and the Nazi Party

**Anti-Semitism** (prejudice against or hatred of Jews) became a major part of the Nazi Party agenda. Four weeks after Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of Germany, the Reichstag, a government building in Berlin which housed the legislature, mysteriously burned. The Nazis quickly blamed the **Communists** for the fire, but some evidence suggested that the Nazis set the fire themselves. Once state of

emergency was declared, Hitler manipulated the circumstances to suspend civil liberties, to censor the press and to prohibit meetings of other political parties. Broad powers were granted to the Nazi-dominated government. These actions set a precedent for dealing with Germany's Jewish population, which was publicly branded as inferior and dangerous. Hitler's public speeches were filled with **propaganda** and **logical fallacies** in an attempt to persuade German citizens to agree with his views. Since their rights were no longer protected, many Jewish lawyers, professors, doctors, musicians and government workers lost their jobs in Germany by the end of 1934.

In 1935, Hitler announced the implementation of the **Nuremberg Laws**, a series of decrees which stripped German Jews of their remaining civil rights. These orders declared that Jews were no longer citizens and prohibited their marriage with other Germans. Jews were excluded from all artistic, literary and film enterprises; they were no longer permitted to own or inherit farmland. The government encouraged book burnings to destroy the work of Jewish scholars and scientists. Anyone having one or more Jewish grandparents was officially classified as a Jew. The laws succeeded in segregating the Jewish population from the mainstream socially, economically and politically. Similar legislation concerning other non-Aryans such as **Gypsies** and **Slavs** quickly followed. During the last half of the decade of the 1930s, over 120 additional ordinances dramatically changed the lives of those who had previously thought of themselves as productive citizens.



*Official Poster of the Berlin Olympics: 1936*

In 1931, the **International Olympic Committee** (IOC) awarded the 1936 summer games to **Berlin**. The gesture signified Germany's return to the global community, but the IOC did not anticipate Hitler's rise to power. The Nazis saw the event as a way to promote their ideology and the superiority of the Aryan race. Propaganda Minister **Joseph Goebbels** hoped to use the event as a showcase for the "new" Germany. The nation built four huge athletic facilities, a polo field, an outdoor theater, several swimming pools and an Olympic Village to house the competitors. Germany's Olympic Committee quickly established an Aryan-only policy for their team and deleted several world-class athletes with Jewish and Gypsy backgrounds from the roster.

The American contingent included Jesse Owens, a talented, African-American runner and a non-Aryan. The United States considered boycotting the games altogether. Bowing to pressure from the IOC, Germany reluctantly agreed to allow foreign Jews to participate and assured the United States that African Americans would be treated well during their visit to Germany. As a result, the opening ceremony welcomed 5000 representatives from fifty-one nations. Jesse Owens quickly became the super star of the XI Olympiad and earned four gold medals. However, it was the Nazis who benefitted the most from the Berlin Olympics. International journalists and tourists were impressed by the lavish effort Germany

had put into these games. Most visitors left with an image of a modern, efficient German state rather than an oppressive, totalitarian government.



*The Interior of a Jewish Synagogue Trashed on Crystal Night*

In order to impress the foreign media, there was a brief respite in the violence against Jews during the Berlin Olympics. However, open anti-Semitism became increasingly accepted as a way of life in the late 1930s. On November 7, 1938, a young Jewish man attempted to avenge the suffering of his family by assassinating a member of the German embassy in Paris. The Nazis in Germany used this excuse to unleash a wave of violence against the Jewish community, which became known as **Kristallnacht** (Crystal Night). In the course of this one evening, over 1000 synagogues were burned and 7000 homes as well as businesses were destroyed. As an additional humiliation, the Jews were forced to pay for the damages caused by this rampage. In the days that followed, the Nazis forced German Jews to transfer the ownership of their businesses into Aryan hands, and public schools were forced to expel all Jewish students.

**STOP:** Answer Section C Questions

## The Ghettos and the Camps

As Hitler conquered Poland and moved into the Soviet Union, another eight million Jews were threatened by Nazi anti-Semitic policies. Polish and Russian Jews were concentrated into isolated areas of large cities called **ghettos**. These sections were sealed off with stone walls and barbed wire. Curfews were strictly enforced, and anyone caught outside the ghetto was usually killed without explanation. Clothing, food and fuel were difficult to acquire. Overcrowding created serious health issues. For example, the largest ghetto, located in the Polish city of **Warsaw**, held 400,000 people in a space that usually accommodated 10,000. Nonetheless, many Jews struggled to keep their dignity and to maintain their traditions. When word of these appalling conditions spread internationally, the Nazis quickly built a model ghetto called **Theresienstadt** near **Terezin** in Czechoslovakia to counter these reports in 1941. The project included manicured gardens, a well-stocked shopping district and new schools. A Red Cross team of inspectors was led to believe that this was a typical ghetto. German propaganda films pictured this as the standard for resettlement. In reality, Theresienstadt was simply a transit station as captives were moved to other ghettos in Poland and the Soviet Union. The ghettos, however, proved to be part of a greater long-range plan known as the **Final Solution**.



On January 20, 1942, sixteen high-ranking Nazi officials met in the Berlin suburb of **Wannsee** to discuss the Final Solution. The **Wannsee Conference** established a concrete plan for the **genocide**, or total destruction of Europe's 11,000,000 Jews. **Concentration camps** were an essential component of this strategy. The Nazis had opened a camp near the German city of **Dachau** in 1933 to house political prisoners. Gradually, more facilities were constructed to confine Jews, Gypsies and non-Aryans. Prisoners were frequently shot and buried in mass graves. With a more sinister purpose, six death camps were established in Poland in 1942. When the victims arrived, they were divided into two groups. Those who were healthy enough to perform heavy labor worked on government projects such as the

construction of roads and bridges. Others were herded into gas chambers disguised as shower rooms and died after being overcome with the effects of a prussic acid called **Zyklon B**. At **Auschwitz**, the largest of these camps, up to 30,000 people were killed daily. With cruel efficiency, the Nazis then burned the bodies in large ovens called **crematoria**. By the end of World War II, over 6,000,000 Jews had lost their lives as a result of this organized form of mass murder.

**STOP: Answer Section D Questions**

**Why Didn't They All Just Leave?**

Why didn't those who were being persecuted by the Nazi regime simply leave? Many students have pondered this simple yet complex question since the conclusion of World War II. The answer lies in the historical context of the 1930s. Many European Jews had owned homes, businesses and farms for several generations and saw themselves as true patriotic citizens. The Jewish population had served in the military during World War I and had been awarded a large share of medals for valor and honor. Therefore, it was inconceivable to many that the persecution would continue. When Hitler came to power, the laws targeting Jews in the Third Reich were passed and enforced gradually so there was no opportunity to foresee the death camps and gas chambers. New arrivals in the concentration camps were often forced to write postcards to their relatives describing pleasant, positive surroundings and encouraging them to come willingly.



**Postcard Sent from Auschwitz: 1942**

In practical terms, the emigration procedures were complicated and expensive. Those wishing to depart had to prove that they had valid travel arrangements and entrance visas for their new destinations. Meanwhile, immigration policies enacted by the United States and other nations restricted the number of new arrivals. It was also necessary to have a valid passport, a certificate from the local police and a document stating that all tax accounts were current. Germans were required to pay a twenty-five percent emigration tax on the value of their assets before departing; German Jews paid an additional twenty-five percent. A list of personal and household property being removed from the country also had to be submitted. Although 300,000 Jews left Europe in the years preceding the war, many were not in a position to do so.

## The Resistance Movement

Although the Holocaust claimed the lives of three out of every four European Jews, many non-Aryans were saved through the efforts of various **resistance groups**. To combat these movements, Germany passed the **Nacht und Nebel (Night and Fog) Order** in 1941. It declared that anyone resisting the implementation of Nazi policies would vanish into the night and fog. Nevertheless, attempts to thwart the Nazi agenda continued. **Benedictine nuns** concealed Jews in their Polish convents while the **Archbishop of Toulouse** was an outspoken opponent of violence against the Jewish population of France. Underground newspapers printed information that went unreported by the Nazi-controlled press.

As conditions for non-Aryans worsened throughout Europe, armed rebellions took place in ghettos and camps. Although the Warsaw Ghetto was destroyed and nearly all its 60,000 residents were killed, the **Jewish Fighter Organization** battled the Nazis for over a month with smuggled weapons. In 1944, there was also an attempt to organize an uprising at Auschwitz. Four women, including **Rosa Robota** and **Ala Gertner**, were able to obtain and to hide small amounts of gunpowder. Eventually, this was used to build a bomb and to blow up a crematorium. Following an investigation, the women were tortured and hanged within full view of their fellow inmates. The Nazis hoped to deter other acts of sabotage, but their harsh measures solidified and intensified the resistance movement.





*The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising*

**STOP:** Answer Section E Questions

## Rescue and Liberation

By 1944, the Allies were rapidly moving toward Germany and were encountering thousands of concentration camp prisoners, who were suffering from starvation and disease. The Soviets were first to enter the major Nazi facilities in Poland. The Nazis had forced the majority of the prisoners to march toward Germany so the Soviets found very few prisoners alive. Before fleeing, the Germans attempted to demolish the camps, but some gas chambers and crematoria were left standing as a result of the quick evacuation. The Soviets then moved on to liberate Auschwitz in January of 1945. Although only a few thousand struggling captives were found, warehouses filled with clothing, including 800,000 men's suits, offered evidence that a mass murder had taken place at this site. As the Americans approached from the West, they entered **Buchenwald** concentration camp and released 20,000 emaciated inmates. The British forces advanced through northern Germany and uncovered the same appalling conditions in the camp at **Bergen-Belsen**. Only after the liberation of these camps did the world fully realize the impact of Hitler's racist policies.



*The United States Army at Buchenwald*

## **Aftermath**

When the World War II ended, an **international military tribunal** was formed to try high-ranking Nazi officials and certain collaborating civilians for their participation in war crimes. Although there was no international precedent regarding genocide as a crime, twenty-four defendants were named, and twenty-two were prosecuted. The Allies used confiscated Nazi documents and eyewitness testimonies to support their case in a series of trials that took place in the German city of **Nuremberg**. Although the defense argued that only the state and not individuals could be considered guilty, twelve men were sentenced to execution while seven received lengthy prison terms. Three of the original defendants were acquitted. The **Nuremberg Trials** established crimes against humanity as an international offense.



*Hermann Goering on Trial at Nuremberg*

The survivors of the concentration camps discovered their torment did not end with the defeat of Germany. Many had no homes since their property had been confiscated; others were diseased and mentally scarred. Anti-Semitism did not cease to exist when the war was over due, in part, to a desire to retain the jobs and property that the Jews had vacated. Some officials insisted the atrocities had never occurred and refused to help what remained of the Jewish population. Holocaust survivors were housed in refugee centers administered by the **United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration**. A number of Jewish agencies, such as the **American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee**, worked to provide food, clothing and vocational training. In 1945, U.S. President **Harry Truman** relaxed the quota restrictions on immigration for persons made homeless by the Nazi regime. Over 400,000 immigrants made their way to the United States with large numbers migrating to Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Mexico as well. Refugees also formed their own organizations and worked for the creation of an independent Jewish state in Palestine. With the establishment of **Israel** in 1948, many displaced persons found a new home in the Middle East.

**STOP:** Answer Section F Questions

## What Does It All Mean?

The Holocaust was not an accident or a fluke in history. It grew out of the social and political climate of the interwar years as well as deeply rooted traditions of intolerance and bigotry. Governments enacted legislation that encouraged hatred,

prejudice and, eventually, mass murder. It serves as a reminder that democratic values and human rights are lost if they are not appreciated, protected and taught.

## **Additional Resources and Activities for this Unit**



[Unit 17 Main Points Worksheet](#)

[Unit 17 A History of Anti-Semitism Article with Quiz](#)

[Unit 17 Anne Frank](#)