

WHAT WAS THE HOLOCAUST?

Although the word genocide was coined in the 20th century, there are many historical examples of genocide dating back as early as the 5th century BCE. Genocide is defined as any act intended to destroy a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group in whole or in part.

These acts include killing members of the group, causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group, deliberately imposing living conditions that physically destroy the group, preventing births, or forcibly transferring children out of the group.



*Shoes of victims of Auschwitz I
photo by Bibi595*

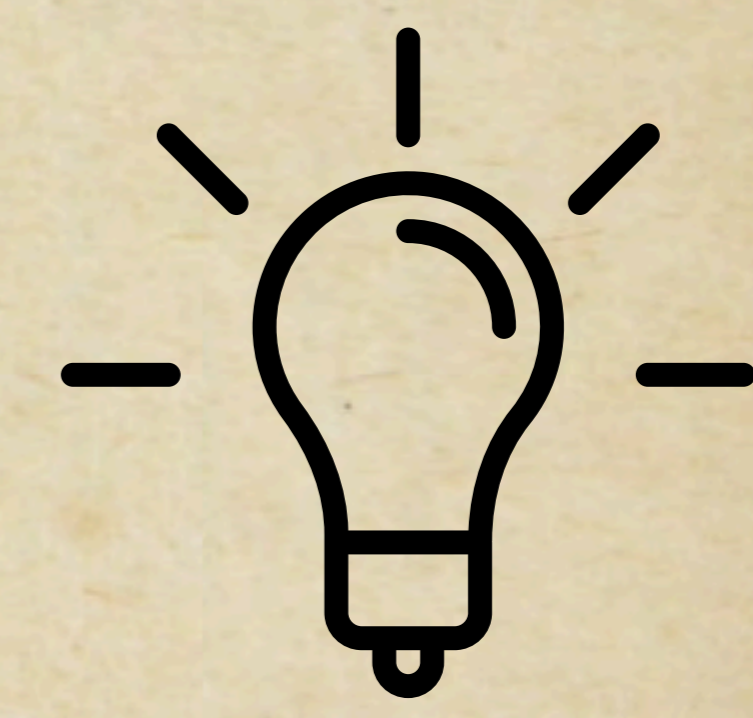


Uniform from museum, photo by HMMSA

The Holocaust is the largest, most systematic, and best-known example of genocide in history. The Nazi genocide against the Jewish people was driven by nationalism and a false belief in German racial superiority. Because of this, the Nazis believed that they deserved to rule the world. Nazis viewed Jews as inferiors who served no purpose. Nazis blamed the Jews, without evidence, for the many economic and political problems that Germany suffered after World War I.

The Nazis believed the solution to these problems was to eliminate the Jewish people and other groups of people believed to be inferior. As Germany expanded its borders during World War II, it murdered these groups in these newly conquered lands. From 1933 to 1945, 11 million people were murdered in gas chambers and by bullets, starvation, and brutal slave labor. Among them were the mentally and physically handicapped, Romani, homosexuals, Poles, and other Slavic people. Six million of those murdered in the Holocaust were Jews.

Have you ever seen someone treat others like they are better or more important? The Holocaust is a real-life example of how these behaviors can spiral out of control if not confronted.

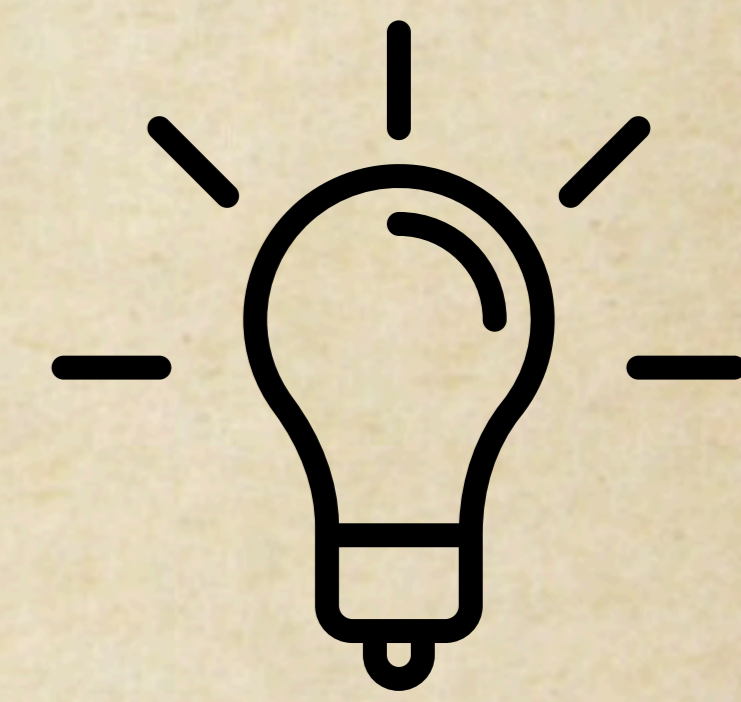


Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin, photo by Alexander Blum



A group of Germans reading an anti-Semitic bulletin board.
Photo from German Federal Archive

It is rare that a gang leader behaves alone. Usually the leader needs the gang to spread their fear. Lies and the promise of power are the first step to convincing others to join the group. Why would someone choose to join a group like this? What type of person chooses not to join the group?



WHAT LED TO THE HOLOCAUST?

While Adolph Hitler, the leader of the Nazi party, was obsessed with a hatred of Jews, he could not commit genocide alone. To convince people that his plan to kill the Jews was in their best interests, Hitler used propaganda and censorship.

Germany was in turmoil and looking for leadership following its humiliating defeat in World War I (1914-1918). German pride and patriotism suffered under the harsh terms of the Treaty of Versailles, and the citizens had little faith in their new government. The Great Depression of 1929 threw Germany into severe economic despair. Unemployment soared and savings disappeared. Fearful and desperate for change, many Germans were eager to hear the uplifting messages of the Nazi Party, which promised to restore Germany's economic and military power.



Reichstag fire, February 1933.
Photo from National Archives and Records Administration



Thousands of books burn in a huge bonfire as Germans give the Nazi salute.
Photo from National Archives and Records Administration

Hoping to restore order and save the government, German president Paul von Hindenburg reluctantly appointed Adolph Hitler chancellor, chairman of the German parliament. However, following the burning of the Reichstag building, Hitler was granted emergency powers that enabled him to enact laws without consulting Parliament.



Hitler Youth

Using these emergency powers, Hitler quickly dismantled German democracy. He suspended civil liberties and established concentration camps to imprison political opponents. Books were removed from libraries and publicly burned. Police, schools, universities, and the media were placed under Nazi control; only Nazi-approved information was distributed.

Propaganda posters, films and radio programs broadcast the Nazi message across Germany. Children, organized into the Hitler Youth movement, were taught strict loyalty and obedience to Adolph Hitler. Religious leaders could face imprisonment or execution if they did not agree to preach "positive Christianity" to their congregations.

In just over a year, Germany became a police state. Everything Germans heard, read, and saw was controlled. They lost civil and legal rights, but despite repression and fear, most Germans supported Hitler. Their patriotism overshadowed any doubts about Hitler's beliefs and intentions.

What happens when someone's freedom is taken away for no reason? Have you ever seen anyone who feels like they have nowhere to go for help? Why is it important to care about what happens to others?



Jewish women with yellow star, Paris, June 1942
Photo from German Federal Archive

Jews have lived in Europe, and been victims of antisemitism, for thousands of years. Because they were not Christians, they were frequent victims of bigotry and persecution.

The European Age of Enlightenment in the 18th and 19th centuries brought gradual improvements in the treatment and inclusion of Jews, including citizenship. Although their new status was never totally accepted in Germany, they tried to fit in. Unfortunately, Hitler's propaganda campaigns easily reinforced old antisemitic beliefs.

WHAT IS HUMAN DIGNITY?



SA pickets, wearing boycott signs, block the entrance to a Jewish-owned shop. The signs read: "Germans, defend yourselves against the Jewish atrocity propaganda, buy only at German shops!" and "Germans, defend yourselves, buy only at German shops!"

Photo from USHMM

Once in office, Hitler's plan to drive Jews out of German life began at once. A 1933 boycott of Jewish businesses in Germany was followed by a series of regulations that barred Jews from many professions. Thousands of musicians, teachers, lawyers, doctors, actors, and artists lost their jobs. In schools, Jewish students were bullied by their classmates and teachers.

The Nuremberg Laws of 1935 defined Jews as the children of at least one Jewish parent or grandparent and took away their German citizenship. Romance between Jews and non-Jews was forbidden. Antisemitism was no longer based on religion but instead on blood and "racial purity." Even Christian converts were identified as Jews based on their family tree.



Chart to describe Nuremberg Laws of 15 September 1935. Only people with four non-Jewish German grandparents (four white circles in top row left) were of "German blood". A Jew was defined by the Nazis as someone who descended from three or four Jewish grandparents (black circles in top row right). Also includes a list of allowed marriages ("Ehe gestattet") and forbidden marriages ("Ehe verboten").

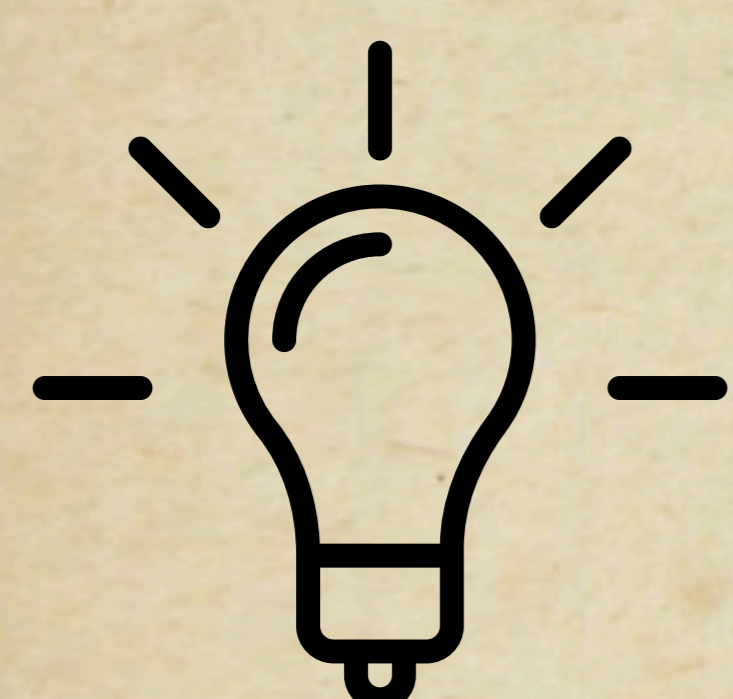
Photo from USHMM



Jewish armband from France, photo by HMMSA

German Jews became outcasts. Signs forbidding them from public places were posted throughout Germany. After 1938, Jewish people were ordered to wear star-shaped badges or armbands and to carry special identification cards that were stamped with a red letter "J." Physical attacks were common, and Jews were regularly arrested without reason and sent to concentration camps.

As patriotic citizens, German Jews believed that Hitler's policies were only temporary. They tried to adapt by organizing their community to educate their children and give jobs to the unemployed. Even as the persecution worsened, their loyalty to Germany remained strong. Many would not believe that the nation they loved and fought for in World War I could turn against them.



What happens to an abuser if they know that the rules don't apply to them, or that nobody cares what they do? Imagine being the victim of a leader who makes up his own rules and can do anything he wants to anyone he doesn't like.

By 1938, one in four German Jews had emigrated, and most of the remaining Jews were trying to find a way out. Although the Nazis encouraged Jews to leave, they did not allow them to take their money or possessions. Prominent scientists, researchers, and artists were able to find countries willing to offer refuge, but many working-class people were not as lucky. As the number of people seeking escape increased, countries tightened their immigration policies and limited the number of Jewish refugees.



Woman registering to emigrate to Palestine, Berlin 1935
(source unknown)

WHY DIDN'T THEY JUST LEAVE?

In July 1938, an international conference in Evian, France, addressed the crisis. Delegates from 32 nations expressed their concern, but only one agreed to increase its immigration quotas. The Evian Conference was a cruel disappointment to German Jews. Except for a few small gestures, the world was indifferent to the Jewish people's plight, a message that was not lost on the Nazis. On the day that the conference ended, one German newspaper declared, "Jews for Sale. Who Wants Them? No One."



United States delegate Myron Taylor delivers a speech at the Evian Conference on Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany. Evian-les-Bains, France, July 15, 1938.

Photo from National Archives and Records Administration

That conclusion was confirmed a year later, when the ocean liner St. Louis was turned away from Cuba. Although all 937 passengers had landing permits, only a few of them were allowed entry to Cuba. Attempting to find relief to the north, the ship was also denied permission to dock in the USA or Canada. Forced to return to Europe, only two thirds of the passengers would ultimately survive.



Jewish refugees aboard the MS St. Louis attempt to communicate with friends and relatives in Cuba, who were permitted to approach the docked vessel in small boats.
Photo from National Archives and Records Administration

After years of Nazi propaganda, many Germans began to believe Hitler's ideology. After having been taught to fear and hate the Jews, more citizens now openly supported the Nazi "solution" to eliminate the Jews, setting the stage for the great tragedies of the Holocaust.