

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

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National Socialist German Workers' Party members, known as Nazis, salute their leader Adolf Hitler (center) in 1930. Four years later, he became the sole leader of Germany. Photo from: Wikimedia Commons

The first in a two-part series

World War II was the most destructive war in human history. Lasting from 1939 to 1945, it engulfed the globe and resulted in the deaths of millions of people.

During this time, another horror was taking place in Europe. It was called the Holocaust. The Holocaust was the mass murder of 6 million Jews by German Nazis. Jews are followers of the religion of Judaism.

Millions of people from other groups also were caught and killed by the Nazis. They included Roma (sometimes negatively called Gypsies) and people with disabilities. Jews, though, were the Nazis' main targets and victims.

Adolf Hitler was the powerful leader of Germany and the Nazi Party. To him and his followers, Jews were a lower race of people and a danger to German society. Once he came to power in 1933, he began turning his hateful ideas into deadly action.

Hitler's rise to power

Anti-Jewish bigotry and discrimination had roots in Europe long before the rise of Hitler. Followers of the Jewish religion were often seen as strange outsiders by their Christian neighbors. In many places, this suspicion and hatred took the form of racism. Racism is a dislike of people because of their skin color, culture or where they come from.

Why Adolf Hitler hated Jewish people so intensely is unclear. He served in the German army in World War I, which lasted from 1914 to 1918. Germany's defeat in this war left the country poor and weak. Hitler and people like him blamed the Jews for Germany's downfall, though more than 100,000 German Jews fought for their country.

After the war, Hitler joined a political group that became known as the Nazi Party. He was jailed in 1923 for plotting against the government. In prison, he wrote a book called "Mein Kampf," which means "My Struggle" in English. In the book, he predicted another great war. He said Germany needed to seize more land for its people. He also argued for the elimination of all the Jews in Germany.

Many Germans were still upset about the troubles they faced after World War I. Following his release from prison in 1924, Hitler used their despair and anger to recruit followers.

Under his leadership, the Nazi Party grew. They went from a small political group to a powerful one. In 1933, he was chosen for a top post in the German government. A year later, he named himself "Führer," Germany's supreme ruler. Huge Nazi marches and rallies were staged to show off the Führer's power.

Nazis begin persecuting the Jews

In March 1933, the Nazis opened a prison camp near the town of Dachau. Special police called the Gestapo hunted down Nazi opponents. They filled Dachau with anyone who opposed them. By July, camps like the one at Dachau held about 27,000 prisoners.

In 1933, there were about 525,000 Jews in Germany. The Nazis began persecuting them. They fired Jews from government positions and forced Jewish businesses to close. In 1935, the Nazis passed anti-Jewish laws that took away many of their freedoms.

Jews were constantly bullied. One night in November 1938, Nazi gangs went on a rampage. They burned Jewish synagogues, their buildings of worship. They smashed the windows of Jewish businesses, littering the streets with glass. It became known as "the night of the broken glass," or "Kristallnacht" in German.

Between 1933 and 1939, thousands of Jews left Germany if they could. Those who stayed lived in constant fear.

World War II starts

In September 1939, the German army invaded Poland. The attack marked the beginning of World War II. German forces made thousands of Polish Jews leave their homes and sent them to ghettos in Polish cities. There, they were trapped behind high walls and barbed wire.

That fall, Nazi officials also began a program to kill Germans with disabilities. They planned to use a poisonous gas to murder these individuals. Some religious leaders in Germany protested, but this program continued in secret. These murders served as practice for the Holocaust.