

Nazi Germany: Racism and the Holocaust

In August 1936, a great number of people came to Berlin to enjoy the Olympic Games. What they were permitted to see was the image of a friendly, open, and liberal young nation. There were no signs forbidding Jews access to public buildings, the usage of parks, and the benches therein. Instead, the visitors were impressed by the newly built Olympic Stadium, which had the capacity to accommodate 100,000 spectators, the colourful and extensive live coverage of the world's greatest sport event, and the smoothly running machinery organising such a major spectacle. The press, the government, and even Hitler himself were rather reticent on the issue of race and the superiority of the Aryans*. They wanted results to speak for themselves. But underneath that peaceful surface, Nazi Germany seethed with rampant anti-Semitism, and the terrible machinery that would devour millions of innocent people had already been set into motion.

As early as 1920, it became obvious that Hitler was obsessed with anti-Semitic ideas. Like many of his contemporaries, he misinterpreted Darwin's theories and wrongly used them to explain the dynamics of societies. Thus, he came up with the incredible idea that peoples and races were exposed to a natural selection process which would only allow the strongest race to survive. Hitler was firmly convinced that the German race was indeed the "master-race" and it was even the duty of the German people to exterminate, or at least exploit, "lower" races which were perceived as "parasites."

Immediately after his "seizure of power"* in January 1933, Hitler started to put his theories into practice. He tried to undermine the social and economic position of the German Jews (a tiny proportion of the population) by organising a nationwide boycott of Jewish businesses. (The status of a Jew was defined exclusively by family descent and not by religious belief.) On 1st April 1933, members of the SA* were ordered to stand in front of Jewish-owned department stores, grocery shops, and the offices of doctors and lawyers and carry signs with slogans like "Don't buy from Jews." These first actions against Jews failed to win the support of the wider German public. However, Hitler's next step proved to be more successful. On 7th April 1933, the Civil Service Law* was passed which gave permission to dismiss civil servants who were not of "Aryan descent," thus practically ostracising Jews from such prestigious professions like professors, judges, or teachers. Subsequent laws made it impossible for Jews to work as lawyers and doctors; Jews had successfully been excluded from certain spheres of public life.

Some years later, life would be made even harder for Jews when the Nuremberg Laws* were passed in 1935. Under these laws, the German Jews lost their citizenship and were deprived of their civil rights. In addition, it was made illegal for Jews to marry Germans or even to have a sexual relationship with a German woman or man. This part of the Nuremberg Laws was intended to help keep "the blood of the Aryan race clean," showing once again Hitler's obsession with race and his contempt of the Jews whom he deemed to be nothing but "parasites" that would only "contaminate" the blood of his highly esteemed "master race."

The year 1938 witnessed more hardships for the German Jews. They were issued new documents featuring the letter "J," thus making it very conspicuous that the holder of this document was indeed "not a proper German citizen" anymore. In addition, they were forced to add the name "Sara" or "Israel" to their Christian names. But in November 1938 the persecution of the German Jews, which up

to that point can largely be characterised as legal discrimination, reached a more dangerous level. Orchestrated as a spontaneous reaction to the assassination of the German diplomat Ernst von Rath by the 17-year-old Jewish Herschel Grynszpan in Paris, Germany erupted in a spree of nationwide violence against Jews on the night of 9th November. The Nazi party had organised this “spontaneous outbreak of violence.” Synagogues and Jewish owned property burned while the firemen only prevented the fire from spreading to houses owned by German citizens. Jews themselves were openly attacked: nearly 100 were killed, 30,000 arrested, and many sent to concentration camps* like Dachau, which had been established as early as 1933. The Jews themselves had to pay one billion Reichsmark for the damage that – according to the Nazis – they themselves had caused. This pogrom, which the Nazis euphemistically called the “Night of Broken Glass,”* was the last straw for many Jews. Those who could afford it emigrated from Germany, where public Jewish life had practically ceased to exist.

With the outbreak of the Second World War*, the persecution of the Jews was to escalate. The Nazis set in motion what they referred to as the “Final Solution.”* The conquest of “living space”* in Poland (1939) and the Soviet Union (1941) made it possible for the Nazis to realise their plans for a world dominated by the German “master race.” They wanted to turn the native population of the conquered countries into slaves who would serve the Germans as workers without any rights or education. The Jews, on the other hand, were to be exterminated. Soon afterwards, however, the Nazis themselves refrained from using such explicit vocabulary and invented an alternative language to put their unimaginable deeds into words. They rather talked about “relocation,” “special treatment,” or indeed the “Final Solution” when they actually spoke of the ruthless murder of innocent people. At the same time they had already started to research the most efficient way of killing human beings on a large scale. Their “deadly experiments” ranged from mass shooting to CO₂ poisoning. Eventually, in September 1941, they settled on “Cyclon B,” which was relatively easy and cheap to produce and proved to be most effective, thus allowing for an almost industrialized form of mass murder.

As early as 20th September 1939, it was decided to “relocate” the remaining German Jews to Poland and to gather them in secluded ghettos. Then, in the spring of 1940, the Polish Jews were also rounded up and forced into ghettos to await “further treatment.” Immediately after the German army invaded the Soviet Union on 22nd June 1941, the extermination really began. Then, the first “extermination camps” like Auschwitz II* were established. But not until the year 1942 did the finely-tuned killing machine of the Nazis take its final shape. On 20th January, leading Nazis like Reinhard Heydrich, Adolf Eichmann, and Roland Freisler came together in a villa on Lake Wannsee (Berlin) to decide how the “Final Solution” was supposed to be carried out. They agreed to systematically exterminate the 11 million European Jews. Therefore, they decided to “comb” Europe from West to East to get hold of all the Jews. They were to be transported to the East in order to keep the mass murder as secret as possible. There those still capable of work were supposed to construct roads or work in mines and factories. Many would perish doing that hard physical work. Those who would survive that ordeal were then to be “adequately treated.”

When they finally arrived at Auschwitz and other extermination camps, the “selection process” began. Standing on the “ramp,”* SS-officers* would decide who was still capable of doing work and who was to be sent to the gas chambers immediately. Thus, old age, fragile health, feebleness, or being a small child literally were death sentences. In this way, the Germans killed the horrendous number of

about 6 million Jews – about 1 million in Auschwitz alone. Ironically enough, even the impending liberation of Auschwitz only added to the death toll. When the Nazis learned that the Red Army was approaching, they immediately began the “evacuation process” in January 1945. This euphemism simply means that the remaining inmates of the camp were forced to leave their huts* and to walk for days to a destination where they would either be incarcerated again or transferred to another concentration camp out of reach of the Soviets. About 66,000 inmates had to suffer through that ordeal, but only about 50,000 were actually strong enough to survive these so-called “death marches.”

The number of the dead alone has given rise to the question of how much the German population knew about the fate of the Jews. This question, however, is very hard to answer. The fact that the killing was done in some camps in the east certainly added to the secrecy of the operation. It is difficult to assess how much the individual actually knew about what he or she contributed to the slaughter of human beings. The railway clerk responsible for organising train transportation might have known more than high-ranking officials working in the ministry of internal affairs. It should not be forgotten that Germany was a totalitarian state that closely supervised all communication. It was forbidden to express sympathy for Jews as early as 1941. Those who disobeyed that order were sentenced to three months in a concentration camp. Considering such laws, it is obvious that not very many people actually talked about what they knew or had randomly heard from soldiers returning from the eastern front. Even fewer people were courageous enough to help Jews. We know about individuals who managed to hide Jews or assisted their escape across the border, e. g. to Switzerland. Others saved many lives by protecting them, as Oskar Schindler did.

It would be wrong to believe that the Jews were the only people suffering under Nazi terror. There were others that were also made to suffer. In a concentration camp there were many different inmates. Some were Gypsies*, others were political prisoners, priests, or homosexuals. All these people, however, were stripped of their humanity and were made to live at the whim of their captors. Therefore, it is hardly surprising to learn that concentration camps also were the “playground” for sadistic doctors who could do all sorts of “pseudo experiments” on living human beings. The most notorious was probably Dr. Josef Mengele. To the inmates of Auschwitz, he was known as the Angel of Death since he was most interested in doing “research” on children. His “interests” were manifold. He attempted to change the eye-colour by injecting certain chemicals into children’s eyes, but he was also known to perform amputations, sterilisation, or shock treatment – very often without having anaesthetised his “patients” properly. Other experiments were carried out to test survival chances in plane crashes and damaged submarines.

Doctors trained to ease the suffering of human beings were also involved in still another infamous chapter of Hitler’s rule: euthanasia. This “program” must be regarded in the wider context of Hitler’s obsession with the “purification of Aryan blood.” For him, it was only logical to eliminate anybody that put the “production of a healthy Aryan species” in danger. Therefore, a great number of disabled people fell victim to what came to be known as “Action T4.”* From 1939 to 1941 more than 200,000 innocent people were put to death, which the Nazis themselves perceived as “mercy killing” since they considered a life as only worthy of living if it met Nazi standards.

It is some comfort to know that although many millions of innocent people were killed, at least some of the perpetrators had to account for their deeds after the war, as in the case of Adolf Eichmann

who was sentenced to death. Others, however, like Dr. Mengele, managed to hide or escape and were never taken to court.

5 What conclusions can be drawn about all the events associated with the term “Holocaust?” A US
guide for commemorative programs of the Holocaust states: “From the Holocaust, we begin to under-
stand the dangers of all forms of discrimination, prejudice and bigotry [...]. From the Holocaust, we
can learn the way evil can be commonplace and acceptable – so that no one takes a stand until it is too
late [...]. From the Holocaust, we must remember the depths to which humanity might sink.” ([Days
of Remembrance of the Victims of the Holocaust](#)’, How could it happen that “a people that has pro-
duced Goethe and Schiller, Bach and Beethoven, chose suddenly to put its national genius at the ser-
vice of evil – to erect a monument to its darker Power called Auschwitz?” (From a journalistic report
10 from Elie Wiesel’s speech in Berlin in 1987; E. Wiesel was a survivor of Auschwitz and the 1986 No-
bel Peace laureate; quoted in M. Perry et al., *Sources of the Western Tradition*, vol II, 1991, p. 347.)

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<i>Action T4</i>	The name T4 is nothing but the abbreviation of Tiergartenstrasse 4. Here, at the official headquarters of the <i>Gemeinnützige Stiftung für Heil- und Anstaltspflege</i> , the killing of the disabled was organised.	
<i>Aryans</i>		Arier
<i>Auschwitz II</i>	The name Auschwitz, which is derived from the name of the Polish town Oświęcim where the camp was built, became the symbol of the Holocaust. Auschwitz I was founded as early as 1940 and largely served as the organisational headquarters of the camp, consisting of Birkenau and Manowitz, also known as Auschwitz III. Most of the actual killing was done in Auschwitz II, also called Birkenau (the literal translation of the name of the Polish village Brzeinka which was demolished by the Nazis to make way for the camp, which was established in 1941 as a labour and extermination camp.	
<i>Civil Service Law</i>		„Gesetz zur Wiederherstellung des Berufsbeamtentums“
<i>Concentration camps</i>	There is a difference between concentration camps and extermination camps. The former were places to gather millions of ordinary people in order to exploit their labour, often accepting the death of the inmates. The latter were places of the industrialised mass murder of pre-dominantly Jewish people.	Konzentrationslager; Vernichtungslager
<i>Gypsies</i>	It is estimated that about 250,000 Gypsies were killed in the Holocaust.	Zigeuner
<i>Huts</i>	These huts differed in shape and size from camp to camp. At Birkenau they could either be made of brick or wood. The wooden variant was approximately 37m long by 12m wide and 6m high. About 700 people were crowded into such a hut. There was hardly any ventilation and no heating to speak of.	Baracke
<i>living space</i>	Within the framework of Nazi ideology, the Germans were obliged to conquer "living space" in the east and to enslave the	„Lebensraum Theorie“

	people living there.	
<i>Night of Broken Glass</i>		„Reichskristallnacht“
<i>Nuremberg Laws</i>		Nürnberger Rassegesetze
<i>SA</i>	The Stormtroopers were the first Nazi paramilitary group.	„Sturmabteilung“
<i>seizure of power</i>	On 30 th of January 1933, Hindenburg made Hitler Chancellor of Germany.	„Machtergreifung“
<i>SS</i>	The „Protective Squadron“ of the Nazi party served alongside the regular army, but was never made an actual part of it. Amongst other „duties,“ the SS was responsible for the running of the concentration camps.	„Schutzstaffel“
<i>the final solution</i>		„Endlösung [der Judenfrage]“
<i>The ramp</i>	Denotes the platform where the prisoners disembarked; the original “ramp” was located one kilometre south of Birkenau. Only from May 1944 was it possible for trains to enter Birkenau itself.	Die alte Rampe
<i>The Second World War</i>	The Second World War started on 1 st September 1939 when the Germans invaded Poland.	