

The Nazi Terror Begins

After Adolf Hitler became chancellor of Germany in January 1933, he moved quickly to turn Germany into a one-party dictatorship and to organize the police power necessary to enforce Nazi policies. He persuaded his Cabinet to declare a state of emergency and end individual freedoms, including freedom of press, speech, and assembly. Individuals lost the right to privacy, which meant that officials could read people's mail, listen in on telephone conversations, and search private homes without a warrant.

Hitler also relied on terror to achieve his goals. Lured by the wages, a feeling of comradeship, and the striking uniforms, tens of thousands of young jobless men put on the brown shirts and high leather boots of the Nazi Storm Troopers (*Sturmabteilungen*).

SS Police State

An important tool of Nazi terror was the Protective Squad (*Schutzstaffel*), or SS, which began as a special guard for Adolf Hitler and other party leaders. The black-shirted SS members formed a smaller, elite group whose members also served as auxiliary policemen and, later, as concentration camp guards. Eventually overshadowing the Storm Troopers (SA) in importance, the SS became, after 1934, the private army of the Nazi party.



Members of the SS parade during a rally. Germany, date uncertain. — *US Holocaust Memorial Museum*

SS chief Heinrich Himmler also turned the regular (nonparty) police forces into an instrument of terror. He helped forge the powerful Secret State Police (*Geheime Staatspolizei*), or Gestapo; these non-uniformed police used ruthless and cruel methods throughout Germany to identify and arrest political opponents and others who refused to obey laws and policies of the Nazi regime.

In the months after Hitler took power, the SA and Gestapo agents went from door to door looking for Hitler's enemies. Socialists, Communists, trade union leaders, and others who had spoken out against the Nazi party were arrested, and some were killed. By the middle of 1933, the Nazi party was the only political party, and nearly all organized opposition to the regime had been eliminated. Democracy was dead in Germany.

Jewish Life in Europe Before the Holocaust

When the Nazis came to power in Germany in 1933, Jews were living in every country of Europe. A total of roughly nine million Jews lived in the countries that would be occupied by Germany during World War II. By the end of the war, two out of every three of these Jews would be dead, and European Jewish life would be changed forever.

In 1933 the largest Jewish populations were concentrated in Eastern Europe, including Poland, the Soviet Union, Hungary, and Romania. Many of the Jews of Eastern Europe lived in predominantly Jewish towns or villages, called *shtetls*. Eastern European Jews lived a separate life as a minority within the culture of the majority. They spoke their own language, Yiddish, which combines elements of German and Hebrew. They read Yiddish books, and attended Yiddish theater and movies. Although many younger Jews in larger towns were beginning to adopt modern ways and dress, older people often dressed traditionally, the men wearing hats or caps, and the women modestly covering their hair with wigs or kerchiefs.

In comparison, the Jews in Western Europe—Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, and Belgium—made up much less of the population and tended to adapt the culture of their non-Jewish neighbors. They dressed and talked like their countrymen, and traditional religious practices and Yiddish culture played a less important part in their lives. They tended to have had more formal education than eastern European Jews and to live in towns or cities.

The Nuremberg Race Laws

At the annual party rally held in Nuremberg in 1935, the Nazis announced new laws which institutionalized many of the racial theories prevalent in Nazi ideology. The laws excluded German Jews from Reich citizenship and prohibited them from marrying persons of "German or related blood." Ancillary ordinances to the laws disenfranchised Jews and deprived them of most political rights.

For a brief period after Nuremberg, in the weeks before and during the 1936 Olympic Games held in Berlin, the Nazi regime actually moderated its anti-Jewish attacks and even removed some of the signs saying "Jews Unwelcome" from public places. Hitler did not want international criticism of his government to result in the transfer of the Games to another country. Such a loss would have been a serious blow to German prestige.

After the Olympic Games (in which the Nazis did not allow German Jewish athletes to participate), the Nazis again stepped up the persecution of German Jews. In 1937 and 1938, the government set out to impoverish Jews by requiring them to register their property and then by "Aryanizing" Jewish businesses. This meant that Jewish workers and managers were dismissed, and the ownership of most Jewish businesses was taken over by non-Jewish Germans who bought them at bargain prices fixed by Nazis. Jewish doctors were forbidden to treat non-Jews, and Jewish lawyers were not permitted to practice law.

Like everyone in Germany, Jews were required to carry identity cards, but the government added special identifying marks to theirs: a red "J" stamped on them and new middle names for all those Jews who did not possess recognizably "Jewish" first names -- "Israel" for males, "Sara" for females. Such cards allowed the police to identify Jews easily.



As the synagogue in Oberramstadt burns during Kristallnacht (the "Night of Broken Glass"), firefighters instead save a nearby house. Local residents watch as the synagogue is destroyed. Oberramstadt, Germany, November 9-10, 1938. — *US Holocaust Memorial Museum*

The "Night of Broken Glass"

On the night of November 9, 1938, violence against Jews broke out across the Reich. It appeared to be unplanned, set off by Germans' anger over the assassination of a German official in Paris at the hands of a Jewish teenager. In fact, German propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels and other Nazis carefully organized the pogroms. In two days, over 250 synagogues were burned, over 7,000 Jewish businesses were trashed and looted, dozens of Jewish people were killed, and Jewish cemeteries, hospitals, schools, and homes were looted while police and fire brigades stood by. The pogroms became known as *Kristallnacht*, the "Night of Broken Glass," for the shattered glass from the store windows that littered the streets.

The morning after the pogroms 30,000 German Jewish men were arrested for the "crime" of being Jewish and sent to concentration camps, where hundreds of them perished. Some Jewish women were also arrested and sent to local jails. Businesses owned by Jews were not allowed to reopen unless they were managed by non-Jews. Curfews were placed on Jews, limiting the hours of the day they could leave their homes.

Ghettos in Poland

Millions of Jews lived in Eastern Europe. After Germany invaded Poland in 1939, more than two million Polish Jews came under German control. After Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, several million more Jews

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came under Nazi rule. The Germans aimed to control this sizable Jewish population by forcing Jews to reside in marked-off sections of towns and cities the Nazis called "ghettos" or "Jewish residential quarters." Altogether, the Germans created at least 1,000 ghettos in occupied territories. The largest ghetto was in Warsaw, the Polish capital, where almost half a million Jews were confined.

Many ghettos were set up in cities and towns where Jews were already concentrated. Jews were also brought to ghettos from surrounding regions and from Western Europe. Between October and December 1941, thousands of German and Austrian Jews were transported to ghettos in Eastern Europe. The Germans usually marked off the oldest, most run-down sections of cities for the ghettos. They sometimes had to evict non-Jewish residents from the buildings to make room for Jewish families. Many of the ghettos were enclosed by barbed-wire fences or walls, with entrances guarded by local and German police and SS members. During curfew hours at night the residents were forced to stay inside their apartments.

In the Polish cities of Lodz and Warsaw, trolley lines ran through the middle of the ghetto. Rather than reroute the lines, workers fenced them off, and policemen guarded the area to keep the Jews from escaping on the trolley cars. The passengers from outside the ghetto used the cars to get to work on weekdays, and some rode them on Sunday outings just to gawk and sneer at the ghetto prisoners.

Life in the Ghettos

Life in the ghettos was usually unbearable. Overcrowding was common. One apartment might have several families living in it. Plumbing broke down, and human waste was thrown in the streets along with the garbage. Contagious diseases spread rapidly in such cramped, unsanitary housing. People were always hungry. Germans deliberately tried to starve residents by allowing them to purchase only a small amount of bread, potatoes, and fat. Some residents had some money or valuables they could trade for food smuggled into the ghetto; others were forced to beg or steal to survive. During the long winters, heating fuel was scarce, and many people lacked adequate clothing. People weakened by hunger and exposure to the cold became easy victims of disease; tens of thousands died in the ghettos from illness, starvation, or cold. Some individuals killed themselves to escape their hopeless lives.

The Wannsee Conference and the "Final Solution"

On January 20, 1942, fifteen high-ranking Nazi party and German government leaders gathered for an important meeting. They met in a wealthy section of Berlin at a villa by a lake known as Wannsee. Reinhard Heydrich, who was SS chief Heinrich Himmler's head deputy, held the meeting for the purpose of discussing the "final solution to the Jewish question in Europe".

The "final solution" was the Nazis' code name for the deliberate, carefully planned destruction, or genocide, of all European Jews. The Nazis used the vague term "final solution" to hide their policy of mass murder from the rest of the world. In fact, the men at Wannsee talked about methods of killing, about liquidation, about "extermination."

The Wannsee Conference, as it became known to history, did not mark the beginning of the "Final Solution." The mobile killing squads were already slaughtering Jews in the occupied Soviet Union. Rather, the Wannsee Conference was the place where the "final solution" was formally revealed to non-Nazi leaders. Not one of the men present at Wannsee objected to the announced policy. Never before had a modern state committed itself to the murder of an entire people.



A column of prisoners arrives at the Belzec extermination camp. Belzec, Poland, ca. 1942. - *Instytut Pamięci Narodowej*

At the Killing Centers

After deportation trains arrived at the killing centers, guards ordered the deportees to get out and form a line. The victims then went through a selection process. Men were separated from women and children. A Nazi, usually an SS physician, looked quickly at each person to decide if he or she was healthy and strong enough for forced labor. This SS officer then pointed to the left or the right; victims did not know that individuals were being selected to live or die. Babies and young children, pregnant women, the elderly, the handicapped, and the sick had little chance of surviving this first selection.

Those who had been selected to die were led to gas chambers. In order to prevent panic, camp guards told the victims that they were going to take showers to rid themselves of lice. The guards instructed them to turn over all their valuables and to undress. Then they were driven naked into the "showers." A guard closed and locked the steel door. In some killing centers, carbon monoxide was piped into the chamber. In others, camp guards threw "Zyklon B" pellets down an air shaft. Zyklon B was a highly poisonous insecticide also used to kill rats and insects. Usually within minutes after entering the gas chambers, everyone inside was dead from lack of oxygen. Under guard, prisoners were forced to haul the corpses to a nearby room, where they removed hair, gold teeth, and fillings. The bodies were burned in ovens in the crematoria or buried in mass graves.



Survivors of Mauthausen cheer American soldiers as they pass through the main gate of the camp. The photograph was taken several days after the liberation of the camp. Mauthausen, Austria, May 9, 1945. — *National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Md.*

Liberation

Soviet soldiers were the first to liberate concentration camp prisoners in the final stages of the war. The Germans had been forced to leave these prisoners behind in their hasty retreat from the camp. Also left behind were victims' belongings: 348,820 men's suits, 836,255 women's coats, and tens of thousands of pairs of shoes.

British, Canadian, American, and French troops also freed prisoners from the camps. Although the Germans had attempted to empty the camps of surviving prisoners and hide all evidence of their crimes, the Allied soldiers came upon thousands of dead bodies "stacked up like cordwood," according to one American soldier. The prisoners who were still alive were living skeletons.

Bill Barrett, an American army journalist, described what he saw at Dachau: "There were about a dozen bodies in the dirty boxcar, men and women alike. They had gone without food so long that their dead wrists were broomsticks tipped with claws. These were the victims of a deliberate starvation diet..."

NUREMBERG TRIALS

After the war, some of those responsible for crimes committed during the Holocaust were brought to trial. Nuremberg, Germany, was chosen as a site for trials that took place in 1945 and 1946. Judges from the Allied powers -- Great Britain, France, the Soviet Union, and the United States -- presided over the hearings of twenty-two major Nazi criminals. Twelve prominent Nazis were sentenced to death. Most of the defendants admitted to the crimes of which they were accused, although most claimed that they were simply following the orders of a higher authority. Those individuals directly involved in the killing received the most severe sentences.

The Nazis' highest authority, the person most to blame for the Holocaust, was missing at the trials. Adolf Hitler had committed suicide in the final days of the war, as had several of his closest aides. Many more criminals were never tried. Some fled Germany to live abroad, including hundreds who came to the United States.