

Evolution of the Holocaust

By Walter S. Zapotoczny

On January 30, 1933, Adolf Hitler, leader of the National Socialist German Workers (Nazi) Party, was named chancellor by president Paul von Hindenburg after the Nazi party won a significant percentage of the vote in the elections of 1932. The Nazi Party had taken advantage of the political unrest in Germany to gain an electoral foothold. The Nazis incited clashes with the communists, who many feared, disrupted the government with demonstrations, and conducted a vicious propaganda campaign against its political opponents—the weak Weimar government, and the Jews, whom the Nazis blamed for Germany's ills. A major tool of the Nazis' propaganda assault was the weekly Nazi newspaper *Der Stürmer* (The Attacker). At the bottom of the front page of each issue, in bold letters, the paper proclaimed, "The Jews are our misfortune!" *Der Stürmer* also regularly featured cartoons of Jews in which they were caricatured as hooked-nosed and apelike. The influence of the newspaper was far-reaching. By 1938 about a half million copies were distributed weekly.

With a police infrastructure in place, opponents of the Nazis were terrorized, beaten, or sent to one of the concentration camps the Germans built to incarcerate them. By the end of 1934, Hitler was in absolute control of Germany, and his campaign against the Jews in full swing. The Nazis claimed the Jews corrupted pure German culture with their "foreign" and "mongrel" influence. They portrayed the Jews as evil and cowardly, and Germans as hardworking, courageous, and honest. The Jews, the Nazis claimed, who were heavily represented in finance, commerce, the press, literature, theater, and the arts, had weakened Germany's economy and culture. The massive government-supported propaganda machine created a racial anti-Semitism, which was different from the longstanding anti-Semitic tradition of the Christian churches. The superior race was the "Aryans," the Germans. The word Aryan, derived from the study of linguistics, which started in the eighteenth century and at some point, determined that the Indo-Germanic (also known as Aryan) languages were superior in their structures, variety, and vocabulary to the Semitic languages that had evolved in the Near East. This judgment led to a certain conjecture about the character of the peoples who spoke these languages. The conclusion was that the Aryan peoples were likewise superior to the Semitic ones. The Nazis then combined their racial theories with the evolutionary theories of Charles Darwin to justify their treatment of the Jews. The Germans, as the strongest and fittest, were destined to rule, while the weak and racially adulterated Jews were doomed to extinction.

Hitler began to restrict the Jews with legislation and terror, which entailed burning books written by Jews, removing Jews from their professions and public schools, confiscating their businesses and property and excluding them from public events. They formed the legal basis for the Jews' exclusion from German society and the progressively restrictive Jewish policies of the Germans. On November 9, 1938, the attacks on the Jews became violent. Hershel Grynszpan, a 17 year old Jewish boy distraught at the deportation of his family, shot Ernst vom Rath, the third secretary in the German Embassy in Paris, who died on November 9. Nazi hooligans used this assassination as the pretext for instigating a night of destruction that is now known as *Kristallnacht* (the night of broken glass). They looted and destroyed Jewish homes and businesses and burned synagogues. Many Jews were beaten and killed and 30,000 Jews were arrested and sent to concentration camps.

Germany invaded Poland in September 1939, beginning World War II. Soon after, in 1940, the Nazis began establishing ghettos for the Jews of Poland. More than 10 percent of the Polish population was Jewish, numbering about three million. Jews were forcibly deported from their homes to live in crowded ghettos, isolated from the rest of society. This concentration of the Jewish population later aided the Nazis in their deportation of the Jews to the death camps. The ghettos lacked the necessary food, water, space, and sanitary facilities required by so many people living within their constricted boundaries. Many died of deprivation and starvation. In June 1941 Germany attacked the Soviet Union and began the "Final Solution." Four mobile killing groups were formed called *Einsatzgruppen* A, B, C and D. Each group contained several commando units. The *Einsatzgruppen* gathered Jews town by town, marched them to huge pits dug earlier, stripped them, lined them up, and shot them with automatic weapons. It is estimated that by the end of 1942, the *Einsatzgruppen* had murdered more than 1.3 million Jews.

On January 20, 1942, several top officials of the German government met to officially coordinate the military and civilian administrative branches of the Nazi system to organize a system of mass murder of the Jews. This meeting, called the Wannsee Conference, "marked the beginning of the full-scale, comprehensive extermination operation [of the Jews] and laid the foundations for its organization, which started immediately after the conference ended. By the spring of 1942, the Nazis had established six killing centers (death camps) in Poland: Chelmno, Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka, Maidanek and Auschwitz. All were located near railway lines so that Jews could be easily transported daily. A vast system of camps supported the death camps.

In nearly every country overrun by the Nazis, the Jews were forced to wear badges marking them as Jews. They were rounded up into ghettos or concentration camps and then gradually transported to the killing centers. The death camps were essentially factories for murdering Jews. The Germans shipped thousands of Jews to them each day. Within a few hours of their arrival, the Jews had been stripped of their possessions and valuables, gassed to death, and their bodies burned in specially designed crematoriums. Approximately 3.5 million Jews were murdered in these death camps. Many healthy, young strong Jews were not killed immediately. The Germans' war effort and the "Final Solution" required a great deal of manpower, so the Germans reserved large pools of Jews for slave labor. These people, imprisoned in concentration and labor camps, were forced to work in German munitions and other factories. They were worked from dawn until dark without adequate food and shelter. Thousands perished, literally worked to death by the Germans and their collaborators. In the last months of Hitler's Reich, as the German armies retreated, the Nazis began marching the prisoners still alive in the concentration camps to the territory they still controlled. The Germans forced the starving and sick Jews to walk hundreds of miles. Most died or were shot along the way. About a quarter of a million Jews died on the death marches. The total number of six million Jews murdered during the Holocaust, which emerged from the Nuremberg trials, is also an estimate. Numbers have ranged between five and seven million killed.

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