

THE HOLOCAUST IN GERMANY

THE NAZI YEARS (1933-1939)

On January 30, 1933, Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of Germany, when his Nazi Party received 33% of the vote. He immediately took steps to consolidate his control over German society and to begin his program of intimidation and persecution of Germany's Jews. Within the first 3 months Joseph Goebbels was appointed Minister of Propaganda and charged with controlling the media and all forms of cultural expression. Special courts were established for prosecuting political enemies of the state. Heinrich Himmler opened the first concentration camp at Dachau in Germany for political enemies of the regime. The Reichstag (German legislature) passed the Enabling Act, giving Adolf Hitler the power to make laws by decree and effectively eliminating the Weimar Constitution. The Nazis led a nationwide boycott of Jewish-owned businesses. German- Jewish doctors, lawyers, and other professionals were forcibly prevented from entering their offices. The *Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service* was the first law since Germany became a unified country in 1871 to discriminate specifically against German Jews. It prohibited Communists and other opponents of the Nazis as well as Jews (whom it labeled "Non-Aryans") from working in or for state and municipal governments. It also prohibited public school teachers, university professors, doctors, lawyers, and notaries in the public sector.

These laws were followed by laws that disbarred Jewish lawyers, made it difficult for Jews to observe their religion (especially eating kosher food and observing the Sabbath), placed heavy restrictions on Jewish high school and university students (limiting their number, barring them from taking professional exams, taking away their scholarships), and put anti-Jewish clauses into the bylaws of professional organizations, societies, and social clubs, making it nearly impossible for Jews to protect their professional interests and to meet with their colleagues.

The Nazis' anti-Jewish policies operated on two levels: through laws, decrees, and administrative persecution, and through "spontaneous" acts of terror and incitement of popular hostility. They culminated in the Nuremberg Laws of September 15, 1935. These were constitutional laws that provided for the definitive legal and social separation of German Jews from German non-Jews, contained a new definition of "Jew" based on "racial" criteria and deprived German Jews of their citizenship, effectively "undoing" their assimilation into German society.

They consisted of the

- *Reich Flag Law*: which made red, white, and black the official national colors and which made the swastika flag the national flag.
- *Reich Citizenship Law*: which stripped German Jews of their German citizenship, designating them as *Staatsangehorige* (*state subjects*) and designating German non-Jews as *Reichsbürger* (*citizens of the Reich*).
- *Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honor*, which decreed that Jews were forbidden to marry or have sexual relations with non-Jews, to employ non-Jewish women under the age of 45 in their households, to display the German flag (an offense against German honor).

Between 1935 and 1938, they were followed by batteries of corollary and supplementary laws that deprived Jews of their civil rights, prevented them from pursuing their occupations and practicing their professions, and locked them out of most economic, social, and cultural venues.

KRISTALLNACHT ("NIGHT OF BROKEN GLASS") ON NOVEMBER 9-10, 1938

This was a national pogrom against Germany's and Austria's Jews (Austria had by then been annexed to Germany without any appreciable international protest). In October 1938, more than 17,000 Jews of Polish citizenship were forced from Germany to a Polish border town where they were kept under horrible conditions. Among those deported was the Grynszpan family. Herszel Grynszpan, who had been born in Germany but was living illegally in France, in despair at the news of his family's deportation, went to the German Embassy in Paris and shot the first official he met, Ernst Vom Rath. Vom Rath died three days later. Giving revenge as the reason, Joseph Goebbels ordered acts of violence directed against the Jews of Germany and Austria in what amounted to a wholesale pogrom.

On November 9 and 10, 1938 more than 200 synagogues were set afire or completely destroyed, 7,500 Jewish shops and businesses were vandalized, 30,000 Jewish men were imprisoned in German concentration camps, Jewish homes were ransacked, burned, or destroyed, and close to 100 Jews were killed.

After *Kristallnacht*, in 1938 and 1939 the Nazis passed laws that completed the total isolation of German Jews from all aspects of German society. Jewish emigration from the Reich reached its peak, despite the difficulties that hampered it. Still, by 1938, about 150,000 German Jews or one in four, had already fled the country. Altogether, between 1933 and 1945, some 346,000 Jews emigrated from Germany. Of these, 98,000 fled to countries that were later conquered and occupied by the Nazis (like Anne Frank's family).

WORLD WAR II (1939-1945)

On September 1, 1939, the Germans invaded Poland and World War II, began.

German Jews were now faced with a new round of anti-Jewish decrees and regulations that covered every aspect of their lives. After September 1939 they could not leave their homes after dark. Certain sections of cities were out of bounds to them. Their allocation of rationed foods was reduced. Their purchases were restricted to certain shops and certain times of day. They had to hand over their jewelry, radios, cameras, electrical appliances, and any other valuables in their possession.

After September 1941, all Jews aged six and above were required to wear the Jewish star. They were no longer permitted to use public transportation. They were forced out of their homes and concentrated in *Judenhäuser* ("Jewish buildings"). Jews declared "fit for work" were made to do forced labor. More and more individual Jews were imprisoned in concentration camps. Jews were removed from the protection of the laws and placed under the exclusive jurisdiction of the security services (the Gestapo and the SS) and the police.

In October 1941, as the mass murder of Jews by the *Einsatzgruppen* (the mobile shooting squads on the eastern front) was in full swing the Nazis began their systematic deportation of German Jews to the Warsaw and Lodz ghettos in Poland and to the Kovno, Riga, and Minsk ghettos in the German-occupied parts of the Soviet Union. Most were they were killed on arrival, or during the course of brutal "actions," or where they succumbed to starvation and disease.

In 1942 and 1943 tens of thousands German Jews were deported directly to the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp. Up to 42,000 German Jews, mostly elderly people and those with "privileged status," (such as Rabbi Leo Baeck) were sent to Theresienstadt (Terezín), a camp located thirty miles outside of Prague, from where those still alive were deported to Auschwitz in 1944.