

Changing World - Overview

Overview

Defeated in World War I, Germany fell into a deep economic depression. Promising a return to strength and prosperity, the radical National Socialist Party (Nazis) gained popularity. Adolf Hitler and the Nazis implemented a policy of racism, hatred, intimidation, and violence.

In the early 1900s, antisemitism became a central theme in a number of political parties whose leaders blamed Jews for the social and economic problems following the loss of World War I. Antisemitism is the hostile belief or behavior toward Jews just because they are Jewish. Antisemitism had existed for centuries in Europe.

The Nazis defined Jews as a race. Germans were seen as “superior,” and Jews, at the bottom of the scale, were the most dangerous. The Nazis also targeted homosexuals, people with disabilities, Roma/Sinti (Gypsies), Jehovah’s Witnesses, Afro-Germans, and Poles.

Adolf Hitler founded the Nazi party in Germany in 1919. As the depression following World War I deepened, Hitler’s popularity increased. In 1930, the Nazi party won 107 seats in the Reichstag, the German legislative body. In 1933, Hitler was appointed Chancellor of Germany. His first 100 days in power were marked by mass arrests, suppression of free speech, the opening of the first concentration camps, and the purging of all political opponents.

The Nuremberg Laws, passed in 1935, stripped Jews of German citizenship, removed them from public office, outlawed marriages between Jews and non-Jews, and defined a Jew as “a person with two Jewish parents, or three or four Jewish grandparents.”

On the night of November 9, 1938, throughout Germany and Austria, the Nazis destroyed 267 synagogues, smashed windows of Jewish-owned stores, and arrested 30,000 Jewish men. This event, known as *Kristallnacht* (the Night of Broken Glass), marked a transition to an era of destruction and genocide.

Holocaust Survivors - Video Clips

The survivors featured below live or have lived in Washington State. The country listed in parentheses is the country in which they were living during the Holocaust. These survivors, with their history and stories, have shaped our community, contributing to its richness and diversity. They challenge us to understand history through personal narrative - to see complex human beings behind the facts.

Eva Tannenbaum-Cummins (Germany) - <https://youtu.be/5EM9cWF0mls>

My father was a highly-respected music and drama critic in Berlin at the time and, very early on, namely in 1933, right when Hitler took over, he was let go from the newspaper on which he worked at the time. At the time, I was going to this particular place, Olivaer Platz, and there I see suddenly these yellow benches: “für Juden” in big, bold letters. And then there was another incident. Namely, nearby on the Kurfürstendamm, which was a very elegant street in Berlin, were glass-encased billboards with great big things of caricatures of what a Jew is supposed to look like, on *Der Stürmer*, the Nazi newspaper. So, I came upon these great big things. Horror, really, at something so gross I couldn’t name it as yet. But, just seeing it was one more manifestation. But, again, I was so young so I couldn’t put it, really, quite together and ran away from that.

Fred Kahn (Germany) - https://youtu.be/P_yQmabR29I

There was the famous *Kristallnacht* in November of 1938. That was the first time my father was arrested, and also I was arrested for the first time. I was very young then. Some windows were broken out in our house. There came a truckload of SS men. They stopped in front of our house and they wanted to come in and do the looting and smashing from the furniture and windows and so on. The *Bürgermeister* from this small town, he came and he protected us. He said, “This man was in the first World War. He received the Iron Cross. He fought for Germany, and I won’t let anybody go in this house.”

Klaus Stern (Germany) - <https://youtu.be/w1RfEQkYRvM>

I had many Jewish friends, but my best friend was a non-Jewish boy, Walter. And one day, come my best friend to me and say, “Klaus, I can’t play with you anymore.” I say, “What are you talking about? We are the best of friends! We never had an argument. What’s going on with you?” He said, “Well, I have to tell you the truth. I have to join the Hitler Youth, like anybody else. And if anybody sees me playing and going out to concerts or movies with a Jewish boy, my parents might lose their business.” Here I lost my best friend and buddy Walt because he had to join the Hitler Youth and I was Jewish. That was a big shock for me.

Nora Eilenberg (Poland) - <https://youtu.be/SZUHi-QKVAg>

The first thing, the German came, they sealed all the businesses—the Jewish businesses. Nobody was allowed to go in or take anything out. That was the first thing. The second thing, every Jew was ordered to return any radio that they had. I remember we just bought a beautiful new Telefunken radio, the newest—there was no television at the time. There was the newest model, we had to turn it in. The telephones were turned off, we couldn’t use them. All bicycles had to be turned in. My younger brother, who just was a boy of 18 years old—or 16?—he had just gotten his first new bike and he had to turn it in.

Questions

- 1) Based on the information in this article and what you can infer, why do you think Hitler and the Nazis gained increasing popularity?
- 2) What are some things Hitler and the Nazis did to gain complete, total control of Germany and its people?
- 3) What was *Kristallnacht*, and why is it significant to the Holocaust?
- 4) In Fred Kahn’s video clip testimony, he recounts how his town’s *bürgermeister* (mayor) came to his father’s defense against the Nazi S.S. officers on *Kristallnacht*. In contrast, Klaus Stern’s best friend, Walt, refused to play with him anymore – because Klaus was a Jew and Walt was not. How do you explain why some non-Jews helped defend and protect Jews and others disassociated themselves from them, did nothing, or acted directly against Jews?
- 5) Explain how the video clip testimony of Eva Tannenbaum Cummins and Nora Eilenberg connects

with written information in this section.

- 6) Over time, the Nazis required Jews throughout occupied Europe to wear a Star of David, a symbol of Jewish faith, not unlike how a cross symbolizes Christian faith. How might being forced to wear such a symbol conspicuously on all of your exterior upper body clothing be dehumanizing?