The Holocaust, Part One: The Rise of Adolf Hitler and World War II

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The word “Holocaust” comes from the Greek words “holos” (whole) and “kaustos” (burned). The term was historically used to describe a sacrificial offering burned on an altar.

Since 1945, however, the word has become synonymous with one of the darkest chapters in human history: the mass murder of some 6 million European Jews by the German Nazi regime during World War II. Millions of others from targeted groups were also put to death, including Roma (sometimes pejoratively called Gypsies), homosexuals and people with disabilities. Jews, though, faced a level of persecution difficult to comprehend.

To Nazi leader Adolf Hitler, Jews were an inferior race, and he and his followers considered them an alien threat to German racial purity and society. After he and the Nazis came to power in Germany in the 1930s, Jews were routinely persecuted there. Hitler’s “Final
Solution" — now known as the Holocaust — came to fruition under the cover of world war. As world powers concentrated on battlefronts, Nazi henchmen constructed mass killing centers in the concentration camps of Nazi-occupied Europe.

**Historical anti-Semitism and Hitler's rise to power**

Anti-Semitism, or anti-Jewish bigotry, had roots in Europe long before Hitler's rise. Though use of the term "anti-Semitism" dates only to the 1870s, there is evidence of hostility toward followers of Judaism as far back as the ancient world. The Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries emphasized religious toleration, and in the 19th century, Napoleon and other European rulers enacted legislation that ended long-standing restrictions on Jews. Anti-Semitic attitudes endured, however, and in many places, they took on a racial character rather than a religious one.

The roots of Hitler's particularly virulent brand of anti-Semitism are unclear. Born in Austria in 1889, he served in the German army during World War I, which lasted from 1914 to 1918. In defeat, Germany was left economically and politically devastated as well as humiliated by the Allied victors. Like many anti-Semites in Germany, he blamed the Jews for the country's downfall, though some 100,000 German Jews fought for their country during the war.

Soon after the war ended, Hitler joined the National German Workers' Party, which became the National Socialist German Workers' Party, better known as the Nazis to English speakers. In 1923, he was found guilty of treason for his leadership role in the so-called Beer Hall Putsch, an attempt to overthrow the government in the German state of Bavaria.

While imprisoned, Hitler wrote the memoir and propaganda tract "Mein Kampf"—"My Struggle." In it, he predicted another European war that would result in "the extermination of the Jewish race in Germany." Hitler was obsessed with the idea of the superiority of the "pure" German race, which he called "Aryan." He also argued for the need for "Lebensraum," or living space, for that race to expand.

In the decade after he was released from prison, Hitler took advantage of the weakness of his political opponents. He built his party's status, raising it from obscurity to power. On January 20, 1933, he was named chancellor of Germany. After President Paul von Hindenburg's death in 1934, Hitler anointed himself "Fuhrer," becoming Germany's supreme ruler.

The twin goals of racial purity and territorial expansion were the core of Hitler's worldview. From 1933 onward, they combined to form the driving force behind his foreign and domestic policy.
Nazis persecute the Jews

The first official concentration camp opened near the town of Dachau in March 1933, and many of the first prisoners were the Nazis' political enemies. Like the network of concentration camps that followed, Dachau was under the control of Heinrich Himmler. Himmler served as head of the elite Nazi guard, the Schutzstaffel (SS), and later became chief of the German police, or Gestapo. By July 1933, German concentration camps held some 27,000 prisoners. Huge Nazi rallies and symbolic acts such as the public burning of books written by Jews, liberals and foreigners helped drive home the message of party strength.

In 1933, Jews in Germany numbered around 525,000 — about 1 percent of Germany's population. During the next six years, Nazis undertook the “Aryanization” of Germany. They dismissed non-Aryans from civil service, liquidated Jewish-owned businesses, and stripped Jewish lawyers and doctors of their clients. Under the Nuremberg Laws of 1935, anyone with three or four Jewish grandparents was considered a Jew. Those with two Jewish grandparents were designated Mischlinge, or half-breeds.

Under the Nuremberg Laws, Jews became routine targets for discrimination and persecution. This culminated in Kristallnacht, or the “night of broken glass,” in November 1938. Synagogues were burned across Germany and windows in Jewish shops were smashed; some 100 Jews were killed and thousands more arrested. Between 1933 and 1939, hundreds of thousands of Jews who were able to flee Germany did, while those who remained lived in a constant state of uncertainty and fear.

World War II begins

In September 1939, the German army invaded the western half of Poland, marking the beginning of World War II. German police soon forced tens of thousands of Polish Jews from their homes and into ghettos, giving their confiscated properties to ethnic Germans and Polish non-Jews. Surrounded by high walls and barbed wire, the Jewish ghettos in Poland functioned like captive city-states, governed by Jewish Councils. These virtual prison camps suffered widespread unemployment, poverty and hunger, while overpopulation made them breeding grounds for deadly diseases such as typhus.

Beginning in the fall of 1939, Nazi officials selected about 70,000 Germans institutionalized for mental illness or disabilities to be gassed to death in the so-called euthanasia program. After prominent German religious leaders protested, Hitler officially ended the program in August 1941, though it continued in secret. By the war’s end in 1945, some 275,000 people identified with disabilities had been killed across Europe. In hindsight, it seems clear this euthanasia program functioned as a test run for the coming Holocaust.