The Tragic Legacy of the Holocaust

No one reason alone paved the way for the Holocaust to occur. It was the combined result of many factors: racism, combined with centuries-old bigotry, renewed by a nationalistic fervor which emerged in Europe in the latter half of the 19th century, fueled by Germany's defeat in World War I and its national humiliation following the Treaty of Versailles, exacerbated by worldwide economic hard times, the ineffectiveness of the Weimar Republic, and international indifference, and catalyzed by the political charisma, militaristic inclusiveness, and manipulative propaganda of Adolf Hitler's Nazi regime. All of these factors contributed to the eventuality of the Holocaust.

World War I never totally resolved
Ravaged by World War I, the German state was already in poor economic shape before the Depression of the 1920's struck. Reparation demands and a weakened infrastructure led to inflation and unemployment. The democratic institutions artificially established by the Allies and a feeling of global alienation as a result of a guilt clause and land seizures in the Treaty of Versailles exacerbated social turmoil and left Germany looking for someone to blame. The Weimar Republic, a weak democracy, never really effectively governed Germany and therefore was not much of a match for the Nazi party when it gained power.

An old prejudice rears its ugly head
Anti-Semitism was not unique to Germany. Jews were historically persecuted as excellent scapegoats. In the medieval times they were blamed for the plague, depicted as having horns and cloven feet as well as sacrificing Christian babies. During the Crusades Jews were killed by pillaging Christians on the way to "reclaim the Holy Land." Jews were often subjected to prejudice, boycotts, exclusion, restrictive laws, attacks, and killings. Some Christians felt that Jews were Satanic because they killed their Messiah. The Spanish Inquisition of the 1400's forced Jews to convert, leave Spain or be burned at the stake. Jews became increasingly distant from Christians. Medieval Jews were kept out of guilds and forced into the job of moneylending. There was a popular myth that Jews killed Christian children to make unleavened bread. The fact that the Jews of the diaspora were often wandering about without clear roots made them even more alien.

The Protestant Reform of 1517 did not help the Jewish relations with the Church as well. Martin Luther, was at first desirous of Jewish conversion to Lutheranism, but upon the decline of his offer of conversion, his failure turned to hatred of the Jews and their religion. He declared the Jews unfit to live. It wasn't until recently (1994) that the Lutheran Church re-examined his racist ideology and rejected that portion of it; similarly, it wasn't until 1960 that the Pope offered an apology for the treatment they suffered at the hands of the Catholics over the ages. A forged book, The Protocols of the Elders of Zion, published in 1900 and proven to be a fraud led to the belief that there was a Jewish world domination plot. However, none of the discrimination that Jews were subject to elsewhere could match the inhuman extremes of Adolf Hitler (and the Nazis), who claimed he was acting with the Lord and "finishing the job."

A new level of hate and blame
Hitler was able to exploit anti-Semitic feelings. His plan to do so was spelled out in Mein Kampf in 1924 (written during his short stay in prison for a failed coup); by 1933 it had sold over a million copies. Although his ideas seemed ridiculous at the time, (and therefore garnered little international worry until it was too late) he managed to implement many of them upon taking power. His singular leadership seemed to have ignited problems boiling under the surface of Germany.

Hitler, perverting the ideas of Social Darwinism, felt that the Jews were an evil that was at the root of Germany's problems and must be therefore must be eliminated. Hitler claimed that Germany never really lost World War I but was stabbed in the back by a Jewish/Communist conspiracy. The discovery of a scapegoat gave the Germans something to work toward eliminating. The anger and humiliation was now directed away from themselves, Germans could focus all of their negativity on the Jews. Nazism became widespread and its oppression of the Jews grew into the genocide that was the Holocaust.

1933-1939

Once firmly in power, Hitler's plans for the ending of the struggle between the Aryan race and the "inferior races" was set to work. These races were feared as a biological threat to the "master
race" purity. Hitler gained further support for his ideas via Nazi Propaganda Ministry, headed by Dr. Joseph Goebbels, which filled the popular media with pro-Nazi material. Anything opposing the Nazi Party was censored and removed from the media. All forms of communication: newspapers, magazines, books, public meetings, rallies, art, music, movies, and radio, was controlled by the Nazis. Bookburnings of books that didn't gel with the "Nazi ideals" were frequent, some due to the their authors being Jewish, such as Albert Einstein and Sigmund Freud, but many of them by non-Jews such as Ernest Hemingway, Jack London, Sinclair Lewis, and Helen Keller (a particularly offensive person to the Nazis since she successfully overcame her handicaps).

The Jewish population of Germany hovered around 600,000 in total, less than one percent of the entire German population. Nonetheless, Nazi propaganda identified them as an inferior race and the source of all the economic depression and defeat in World War I- failing to mention that many of the more than 100,000 Jews who had served in the war were highly decorated soldiers. The Jews of Germany still had some prejudices held against them but they were becoming more and more accepted. Interfaith marriages were on the rise and many Jews were prominent citizens: fourteen of the 38 Nobel Prizes awarded to Germans went to Jews. This was about to change, and for the worse.

Laws were instituted against Jews forcing them out of public life, i.e. civil service jobs, law court and university positions, etc. The first organized boycott of Jewish businesses was on April 1, 1933. Jews were forced to label all exterior clothing with a yellow Star of David with the word Juden, (Jew). The "Nuremberg Laws" proclaimed Jews second-class citizens. Furthermore one's Jewishness, according to the Nuremberg Laws, was dependent on that of a person's grandparents, not that person's beliefs or identity. More laws passed between 1937 and 1939 exacerbated the problem further: Jews were more and more segregated and life was made much harder. Jews could not go to public schools, theaters, cinemas, or resorts, and furthermore, they were banned from living, or sometimes even walking, in certain parts of Germany. The Jewish population was less persecuted during the Olympics (as Hitler didn't want to lose the Games to another city) of Berlin in 1936, but no German Jewish athletes were allowed to compete.

The period between 1937 and 1939 also saw an increase in economic hardship for Jews. Actions against Jewish businesses and properties escalated from boycotts and seizures to destruction of stores and synagogues. In November 1938, the Kristallnacht took place, in which Jewish buildings were destroyed, and Jewish men were arrested and murdered. The riot (or pogrom) came be to known as the "night of broken glass." Over 1000 synagogues were burned and 7,000 Jewish business were destroyed. More than 30,000 male Jews were arrested the next morning for their religious beliefs. Some female Jews were arrested and sent to local jails. More restrictions were placed on the Jewish people, making it particularly tough for children, who were essentially housebound.

Jews were not the only target of Nazi persecution despite their status as the main "problem." Nazi hatred extended to include groups deemed racially or genetically "inferior," which was advocated by scientists who promoted "selective breeding," or eugenics for the "improvement" of the human race. Laws were passed between 1933 and 1935 to reduce the number of genetically "inferior" individuals in the gene pool through involuntary sterilization programs. The result: 500 African-German children and 320,000 to 350,000 people judged to be handicapped either physically or mentally were sterilized surgically or subjected to sterilizing radiation. The program drew support from people claiming that the handicapped population was a burden due to their care costs. Many Blacks and Gypsies were also sterilized and prevented from intermarrying with Germans. The Nazi tradition of mixing old prejudices in showed again when laws were passed decreeing Gypsies (30,000 of which resided in Germany) as "criminal and asocial" as a race in general.

Other victims of Nazi persecution included political opponents of Hitler and trade unionists as well as other "enemies of the state." Between 5,000 and 15,000 homosexuals were placed in concentration camps. The 20,000 Jehovah's Witnesses in Germany were banned in April 1933 because their religion prohibited them from swearing any oath to the state or providing service in the state military. Many of them were
put in concentration camps and prisons; their children went to juvenile detention centers and orphanages.

In this time, approximately half the Jewish population of Germany fled along with more than two thirds of the Austrian Jewry, the latter fleeing between 1938 and 1939. Emigration took them to Palestine (mainly), but also the United States, Latin America, Shanghai (where no visa was required for entry, a great convenience), along with eastern and western Europe. The Jews who remained in Nazi Germany were either unwilling to leave or unable to obtain visas. Some could not get sponsors in host countries, or were simply too poor to be able to afford the trip. Many foreign countries made it even harder to get out due to strict emigration policies designed to thwart large amounts of refugees from entering, particularly in the wake of the Depression. The United States, Britain, Canada, and France were among these.

Thirty-eight countries met at Evian, France to discuss the treatment of the Jews in Germany, but no real help was offered, to the delight of the German government, which was amused that while the world criticized their treatment of Jews, nobody was offering the Jews a place to go to when the opportunity was there.

1939-1945

World War II erupted on September 1, 1939, when Germany invaded Poland. It took mere days for Germany to emerge victorious, and the Nazis began to enslave the Poles and destroy their culture, deemed "subhuman." The first step was to eliminate the leaders. Nazis massacred many university professors, artists, writers, politicians, and Catholic priests. Large group of the Polish people were resettled to make room for the "superior" Germans. German families began to move in to the newly annexed land. Thousands of Poles and Polish Jews were imprisoned in concentration camps. (The model concentration camp was Dachau, which was established March 20, 1933 in an abandoned munitions factory.) Over 50,000 "Aryan-looking" Polish children were kidnapped and taken to be adopted by German families. Many were later rejected as incapable of "Germanization" and sent to special children's camps, where death by starvation, lethal injection, and disease was all very possible.

During the beginning of the war, Hitler authorized an order to kill institutionalized, handicapped patients deemed "incurable." State hospitals filled out questionnaires on their patients, which were then reviewed by a special commission of physicians who would simply decide if the subject lived or died. Those marked for death were sent to one of six death camps in Germany and Austria, where special gas chambers killed them. Public protests in 1941 forced the Nazis to continue this "euthanasia" program in secret. Babies, small children, and others were killed afterwards by lethal injection, pills, or forced starvation. Their bodies were burned in crematoria.

The mass murder of the European Jewry and other persecuted groups was thus preceded by the "euthanasia" program, which had all the elements needed for the later genocides in the Nazi death camps: an express decision to kill, specially trained personnel, the equipment for the deadly gas, and the use of the euphemistic terms like "euthanasia" which psychologically distance the killers from their victims and hid the criminal character of the killings from the public.

Germany continued their conquest of most of Europe in 1940, crushing Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, and France handily. June 22, 1941 saw the Germans invade the Soviet Union, breaking their peace. They neared Moscow by September. Italy, Romania, and Hungary all had joined the Axis Powers by this time, led by Germany. The Allied Powers consisted of the British Commonwealth, Free France, the United States, and the Soviet Union.

In the months following the invasion of the Soviet Union, Jews, political leaders, Communists, and Gypsies were killed in mass executions, the vast majority of the victims being Jewish. Mobile killing squads, Einsatzgruppen, carried out these murders at improvised sites throughout the Soviet Union, following behind the advancing German army. The most famous is Babi Yar, near Kiev, where an estimated 33,000 persons, mostly Jewish, were murdered. The killers used language to distance themselves, referring to these executions as "special actions," or "special treatments." Entire communities were literally erased. Towns disappeared. German execution of the handicapped and institutionalized made its way into the Soviet
Union as well. As a result, more than three million Soviet prisoners of war were murdered.

Major changes in the concentration camp system were brought about as a result of World War II. Floods of prisoners in larger numbers, deported from German-occupied countries swamped the camps. Entire groups were often sent to the camps, an example being all of the members of underground resistance organizations who were rounded up in a sweep across Europe due to the 1941 "Night and Fog" decree. The only way to handle all of these new prisoners was to open up hundred of new camps in occupied Europe, which the Nazis did.

Ghettos, transit camps, and forced labor camps were all used in addition to concentration camps by the Germans and their collaborators to imprison their victims. The conditions were horrible, food was kept scarce on purpose, diseases spread, and life was desperate. Many committed suicide just to escape the situation. In the aftermath of the invasion of Poland, three million Polish Jews were forced into roughly 400 new ghettos. Large numbers of Jews were deported from Germany and other countries to Polish ghettos and other eastern territories.

Polish cities under Nazi occupation (such as Warsaw and Lodz) had Jews confined in sealed ghettos; tens of thousands died from starvation, overcrowding, exposure, and disease. At great risk, Jews made every effort to maintain their culture, community, and religion. The ghettos also served as excellent fodder for forced labor. Nazi forced labor groups worked on road gangs, in construction, and other hard labor for the Nazi war cause, where many died of exhaustion and maltreatment.

It was between 1942 and 1944 that the Germans decided to eliminate the ghettos and deport the ghetto populations to extermination camps, killing centers equipped with gassing facilities in Poland. This was known as the final solution to the Jewish question, implemented after a meeting of senior German officials in late January 1942 at a villa in Wannsee outside Berlin. It was official state policy, the first ever to advocate the murder of an entire people. It was also the first time non-Nazi leaders were entirely informed of the Nazi plan. No one spoke out against it.

Six killing sites were chosen according to their closeness to rail lines (essential for shipping the victims) and for their location in semi-rural areas. The locations were: Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka, Chelmno, Majdanek, and Auschwitz-Birkenau. Chelmno has the shameful distinction of being the first camp in which mass gas executions took place: mobile gas vans piped in the lethal gas, killing 320,000 between December 1941 and March 1943, as well as between June and July of 1944. Belzec used gas vans and later gas chambers, over 600,000 people were murdered between May 1942 and August 1943. May 1942 was the opening of Sobibor, which did not cease killing until a successful one day revolt of the prisoners on October 14, 1943. By that time 200,000 people had died of gassing. Treblinka, the largest (in terms of size) of the extermination camps, and responsible for at least 750,000 deaths, opened in July of 1942 and closed November, 1943- a revolt in August 1943 destroyed much of it. Most of those victims were Jews, some were Gypsies.

Camp living conditions were atrocious. Crammed into windowless, non-insulated barracks, up to 500 in one building, inmates were jammed against one another. No bathrooms were available- a bucket was the only form of waste control. Each barric had about 36 bunks, it was typical for five or six inmates to squeeze onto one plank. Food was scarce and what was available was disgusting. Malnutrition made prisoners easy targets for disease and dehydration.

Auschwitz-Birkenau was the institution responsible for the largest number of European Jews murdered as well as the largest number of Gypsies murdered. An experimental gassing of 250 malnourished, ill Polish prisoners and 600 Russian prisoners of war in September 1941 grew into daily, routine mass murder. More than 1.25 million people were killed at Auschwitz-Birkenau. 9 out of 10 of those were Jews. Four of its gas chambers could hold 2,000 victims at a time. The electrically charged barb wire fencing made escape a virtual impossibility, not to mention the gun towers. Besides the Jews, Auschwitz-Birkenau killed Gypsies, Soviet POWs, and ill prisoners of various nationalities. Between just under three months, (May 14 through July 8, 1944), 437,402 Hungarian Jews were deported to Auschwitz via 48 trains. This is most likely the single largest deportation of the Holocaust. A similar system was used at
Majdanek, which also saw "double usage" as a concentration camp and which was responsible for at least 275,000 deaths.

The SS operated the killing centers, and their methods were similar in each location. Railroad freight cars and passenger trains would bring in victims. Men were immediately separated from women. Prisoners were stripped and their valuables confiscated. They then were forced naked into the gas chambers, disguised as showers, where carbon monoxide or Zyklon B asphyxiated them. The bodies were then stripped of hair, gold fillings and teeth, and burned in crematoria, or buried in enormous mass graves. The hair was used for ship rope and mattresses.

The few picked for slave labor were quarantined, after which they were particularly susceptible to malnutrition, exposure, starvation, and epidemics. Laborers would work outside the camps occasionally, companies like Bavarian Motor Works (BMW) and I. G. Farben used them for cheap labor to save money. They also were often used for medical experiments and subject to extreme brutality on the part of the guards. Many died as a result.

The systematic murders perpetrated by the Nazis were carried out with the help of local collaborators in much of Europe and silently accepted by millions of bystanders. Organized resistance was found in some areas, such as Denmark. The Danish resistance, in the fall of 1943, and with the support of the local population, rescued nearly the entire Jewish population of Denmark from impending deportation to the camps by smuggling them in fishing boats to neutral Sweden in a dangerous and risky national effort. Individuals (the most famous at the moment being Oskar Schindler), in many other countries also risked their lives to save the persecuted. Another famed individual, Raoul Wallenberg, a Swedish diplomat, led the rescue effort that saved tens of thousands of Hungarian Jews in 1944.

In late 1944 the tide of the war had turned. Allied armies approached German soil, and the SS decided to evacuate outlying concentration camps. In an attempt to cover up the evidence of death marches to the inner camps. Many were killed during the marches, and sometimes the Nazis would execute the rest when they reached their destination; during one march of 7,000 Jews, 6,000 of whom were women, 700 were killed during the March. Upon arrival at the Baltic Sea ten days later the rest were forced into the water and shot.

During the final days of the war, in the spring of 1945, conditions in the remaining camps exacted a terrible toll in human lives. Ironically, it had been the goal of the Nazis to keep a record of all the people who was exterminated once the job was "complete" and to open a "museum" of the dead "race." It was this careful record keeping that couldn't be covered up in the hurried attempt to hide evidence or destroy it. Camps like Bergen-Belsen, never intended for extermination, became death traps for thousands like Anne Frank, who died of typhus in March 1945. Nazi propaganda continued to the bitter end to claim that the Nazis had a secret plan to win the war, even though the officials knew it was a lost cause. Majdanek was liberated July 23, 1944 by the Soviets, and the other camps would soon follow, freed by troops from the United States, Canada, and France. Unfortunately many of the freed prisoners were so weak they couldn't eat or digest the food they were given and died shortly after liberation. Survivors would return home to find many prejudices still firmly ingrained in the population- pogroms erupted in Poland and elsewhere, leaving Jews and others technically free, but still prisoners of hate.

The Third Reich collapsed in May 1945. SS guards fled and the camps ceased to function as killing centers, labor sites, or concentration camps. Some become displaced person (DP) camps, such as Bergen-Belsen, Dachau, and Landsberg, all in Allied-occupied Germany.

*Adapted from ThinkQuest*