

Unit Title: Nazi Germany 1933-1941: The Pre-War and Early War Years

Holocaust Education - Historical Notes and Teaching Suggestions for Educators:

Students may gain a better overall understanding of the Holocaust by thinking about it occurring in four overlapping stages. These stages can be described as:

1. segregation and isolation of Jews within Germany;
2. social, political, and economic persecution of Jews by law, designed to coerce Jews into leaving Germany;
3. deportation, expulsion, and/or forced relocation of Jews to ghettos, concentration or labor camps, or from the German sphere of influence altogether;
4. mass murder/genocide.

The first stage began even before the Nazis rose to power as they directed defaming and dehumanizing propaganda at Jews. It was designed to portray them as dangerous outsiders, alien to German culture, who threatened the very existence of the German people. The goal was to turn as many people against the Jews as possible, thus isolating them in preparation for their ultimate removal.

The second stage began on January 30, 1933 when Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of Germany and the Nazis could add the power of the law and the state to their propaganda efforts. As they solidified their grip on German society, they became more and more aggressive in coercing Jews into emigration.

The third stage began with the German occupation of Poland and the beginning of World War II in Europe. Occupation of foreign lands opened the door to a possible territorial solution to the Jewish question through forced removal. Ghettos for Jews in the German-occupied eastern territories were originally considered a temporary measure to facilitate this territorial solution.

The Nazis transitioned into the last stage in the late summer of 1941 as the possibilities for rapid military victory waned and the window for a territorial solution began to close. Many people associate the term “Holocaust” only with the mass murder/genocide that began in 1941, but it really refers to the entire era. It is unlikely that the last stage could have occurred at all without the earlier ones providing the foundation, so it is essential to examine the Nazis’ ideas, policies, and actions in the pre-war period. It was during the early years that the Nazis consolidated their power and created the environment in which they would attempt to implement their racist ideology to its fullest extent. Many lessons about prejudice emerge from this period with serious implications for today.

Main Points:

1. The Nazis did not begin their murder program against Jews immediately upon their ascension to power. Instead, they began a process that would eventually lead to that goal. It is likely that most Nazi supporters did not envision a process that would ultimately lead to direct, genocidal mass-murder. It is certain that most of the targeted victims did not anticipate this end in advance of its occurrence either.

The Nazis spread their ideology through a comprehensive indoctrination program that touched every area of German life. They also instituted a series of gradually increasing restrictions against the Jewish community aimed at their social and political isolation and their removal from the economy. Their goal, at first, was to force Jewish emigration through progressive hardship and hostility. Physical violence tended at first to be sporadic and localized. The *Kristallnacht* Pogrom of November 9-10, 1938 marked a turning point because of the organized nature and national scope of the action.

2. The Nazis had three main goals for the new German society they sought to build:
- a. They wanted to politically and socially unify Germany under the unquestioned leadership of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party. Individuality was to be subsumed for the common good.
 - b. They wanted to strengthen and purify the “Aryan master race” through population growth and the application of eugenics principles.

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- c. They wanted to obtain “living space” (more territory) for Germany to ensure the long-term growth and survival of their anticipated empire.

3. The three goals listed above explain the reasons why, according to Nazi ideology, certain people were considered unacceptable and were persecuted.

- a. The Nazis imprisoned political opponents and religious dissenters because they threatened the complete unity of the German people. Individuals who were suspected as “politically unreliable” were always in danger, but groups that were labeled as opponents (i.e. – Social Democrats, Communists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, etc.) were specifically targeted. The Nazis opened the first concentration camp for political opponents within two months of Hitler becoming the German chancellor.
- b. Handicapped Germans were sterilized and/or killed because they were considered a drain on scarce resources and their offspring would supposedly weaken the Aryan gene pool.
 - i. Jews and Gypsies were considered racially inferior aliens living in the midst of the German people. Jews, in particular, were said to be eager to pollute pure Aryan blood. They were subjected to continual slander, discriminatory laws, acts of violence, and were pressured to emigrate. Other measures, including genocide, would be used against them later.
 - ii. The Nazis considered German homosexuals to be asocial. They were often incarcerated in concentration camps on this charge. They were also failing to strengthen the German people through the addition of pure “Aryan” offspring.
- c. Citizens of occupied countries to the east of Germany, particularly Poles, were persecuted and sometimes killed because their countries were to be fully or partly absorbed into the new German empire. Their populations were to be dislocated and reduced and would continue to exist only to serve the new order. Of course, these actions would occur during the war, only during the last two years covered by this unit, but planning for them, along with war planning, took place during the pre-war period.

4. The Nazis controlled all media outlets and carried on a continual propaganda campaign to maintain support for their programs and for their ideology.

5. The Nazis sought to take over all organizations that might serve as rival centers of power. Other political parties were outlawed. Labor unions were disbanded and replaced by the Nazi Labor Front. School curricula were rewritten to inculcate Nazi ideology. Youth clubs were replaced by the various branches of the Hitler Youth. Through such groups, people often spied on each other and reported “disloyalty” to local Nazi officials.

6. Organizations that the Nazis could not directly control, such as the churches, they sought to subvert through the influence of Nazi supporters from within. In cases where that didn’t work, intimidation was also used.

7. All Germans did not support the Nazis, but most did to at least some degree - enough to make their rule possible. Some went along out of convenience rather than conviction. The consequences of dissent made it difficult, though not entirely impossible, for opponents to engage in resistance.

8. During the 1930’s, Nazi policies created a refugee crisis as many Jews sought to leave Germany. Most nations expressed sympathy toward these Jews but refused to change restrictive immigration policies. The Nazi leadership was emboldened in their persecutions by the lack of concrete action of the world community on behalf of Jews.