

Unit Title: **Before the Holocaust: Jewish Life in Europe and the Rise of Nazism in Germany**

**Holocaust Education - Historical Notes and Teaching Suggestions for Educators:**

Obviously, the causes of the Holocaust reach back farther in time than the beginning of the Nazi era. It is not as if anti-Judaism or antisemitism was an invention of Hitler and the Nazi Party. The purpose of this unit is to briefly examine the long history that came before the Nazi era to discover the deep roots of the Holocaust. This is not meant to be a detailed history, but to provide a foundation upon which students can begin to construct a conceptual framework. As you teach this unit, help students to understand the following points:

Main Points:

1. Jews lived in Europe for centuries prior to the Holocaust. They were not outsiders or newcomers. German Jews, in particular, were highly assimilated into German national identity, language, and culture.
2. Jews were not one single, homogeneous group. They lived in a variety of places. They spoke several languages. They embraced their cultural, religious, and national identities in numerous ways. They were adherents of widely divergent political and social philosophies. It is incorrect to think of them, as the Nazis did, as if they were all the same.
3. Jews faced discrimination and persecution (mostly, but not exclusively, as a minority religious group) throughout European history. This is the main reason they were dispersed so widely across Europe. Many of the Nazis' attacks against Jews followed the patterns established during earlier periods in European history.
4. The history of the Jews in Europe was not uniformly bleak. There were times and places where Jews found greater acceptance and opportunity. There was always hope that things could and would change for the better. This helps to explain why many Jews did not choose to flee as their first response to Nazi persecution. Even the terrible devastation wrought by the Nazis has not extinguished the hope that prejudice and discrimination can ultimately be overcome, but those hopes are now tempered by a deeper understanding of the threat that these forces represent.
5. Germany faced real and significant problems in the post-World War I era. Hitler and the Nazis portrayed themselves as strong leaders who, alone, possessed explanations and solutions. By their willingness to aggressively address these problems, the Nazis gained credibility with many people. Even though their explanations were lies, and their solutions criminal, the problems themselves were real.
6. The Nazis constructed their program in such a way as to appeal to a wide audience. As a result, not everyone who supported them did so for the same reasons. It is incorrect to assume that the antisemitism of the Nazis was the only feature of their ideology that attracted followers. It is also important to note, however, that their antisemitism was openly proclaimed. It was never hidden. No follower of the Nazis could credibly claim to have been unaware of it. To support the Nazis meant, at the very least, acquiescing to the anti-Jewish attitudes and acts regardless of one's own attitudes.