

The persecution of German Jews 1933–39

There was nothing new about anti-Semitism. What made the Nazis' version so frighteningly different?

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Key concept

Causation

Before you read this

It is not enough just to know bits and pieces about Nazi anti-Semitic policy. You need to be aware of the different stages by which it developed and who was involved in it. Remember that the systematic extermination of Jewish people in concentration camps did not begin until well after the war had started.

Traditional **anti-Semitism**, a phenomenon that had existed in Europe over many centuries, was largely religious in character. It opposed Jews because they rejected Christianity. Traditional anti-Semitism held that, if a Jew converted to Christianity, then he could be saved. A new brand of anti-Semitism emerged during the second half of the nineteenth century, influenced by **Social Darwinism** and racial theories, which was much more radical and uncompromising than traditional anti-Semitism. This was based on the definition of the Jews as a race. Hence, there could be no salvation through conversion to Christianity.

Hitler was highly influenced by racial anti-Semitism, a phenomenon that grew in influence in Germany in the years following the First World War and formed the foundation of the Nazis' racial ideology. There can be no doubt about the centrality of anti-Semitism to Hitler's world view. He consistently depicted the Jewish race as the eternal enemy of the **Aryan** race. In *Mein Kampf* (1924) he stated, 'The personification of the devil as the symbol of all evil assumes the living shape of the Jew'. In Hitler's view, the Jews were '**Bolsheviks**', 'seducers of Aryan women' and 'parasites' on the nations in which they lived. Once in power,

Hitler's intense personal hatred of the Jews became central to state policy. As Nazi policy was based upon racial anti-Semitism, all Jews — whether or not they practised their religion — were subjected to persecution by the regime.

Anti-Semitic measures

The first anti-Semitic measure undertaken by the Nazis occurred only 2 months after Hitler became chancellor of Germany. The National Boycott of Jewish Businesses (1 April 1933) was initiated by party radicals, in particular members of the **SA**, who were euphoric after the Nazi Party's seizure of power. Posters and placards were put up outside Jewish shops and businesses, saying 'Germans defend yourselves! Do not buy from Jews!' SA men placed themselves in front of Jewish shops to deter customers. The boycott was intended to become a permanent feature of life in the Third Reich, but because many Germans ignored the SA men and the posters and continued to buy from Jewish shops, it was abandoned after a day. But the first legal measure against the Jews was implemented very quickly thereafter.

On 7 April 1933, the Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service called for the 'retirement' of Jewish officials from their positions. Veterans of the First World War were exempted from this decree, as a concession to President Hindenburg. By May 1933, all non-Aryan public sector employees were dismissed from their jobs. After this, the range of professions and occupations from which Jews were excluded gradually widened. Policies and legal measures designed to persecute Germany's Jews and to segregate them from the rest of society were accompanied by informal social ostracism. Jews were encouraged to give up their membership of clubs and organisations, while Germans began to sever their friendships and professional ties with Jews.

anti-Semitism: hostility to and prejudice against Jewish people.

Social Darwinism: belief that individual races have different degrees of intelligence, based on Charles Darwin's biological idea of the survival of the fittest. Used by racist nationalists in nineteenth and twentieth centuries to support the view that Germans were superior to other European races and white Europeans superior to other racial groups.

Aryan: ancient Indo-European race from whom most Europeans and Indians are descended.

Bolsheviks: Marxist/Leninist communists.

SA (*Sturmabteilung*): brown-shirted paramilitary storm trooper group, formed by the Nazi Party.

- Racial anti-Semitism differed from earlier brands of anti-Semitism. It was much more radical and uncompromising.
- Anti-Semitic legislation was accompanied by informal social ostracism throughout the 1930s. This was aimed at separating the Jews from the rest of German society.
- *Kristallnacht* was a turning point in the Nazi persecution of the Jews. It was a nationwide, violent pogrom that took place in full view of the German population.
- After *Kristallnacht*, the role of the SS in anti-Semitic policy became much greater.
- Anti-Semitic policy took its direction from a number of prominent Nazi leaders and power centres, not just from Hitler himself.

The Nuremberg Laws

By 1935, a new surge of anti-Semitism arose, particularly among party activists at the local level and the SA. This formed part of the background for the implementation of the Nuremberg Laws. The laws themselves were the result of a compromise between the fervent racists in the party (such as Julius Streicher, **Gauleiter** of Franconia) and the less extreme civil service. The Nuremberg Laws of September 1935 consisted of two edicts designed to segregate Jews from the rest of society and to exclude them from the national community. The Reich Citizenship Law denied Jews their equal civil rights, redefining them as subjects instead of citizens. The Law for the Protection of German Blood and Honour prohibited marriages and sexual relationships between Jews and Aryans.

The significance of the Nuremberg Laws was their creation of a legal separation between the Jews and the rest of German society. When the Nuremberg Laws were passed, many Jews saw them as a definitive clarification of their social and legal position. Many regarded the Nuremberg Laws positively, believing that, if they lived within the parameters defined by them, the violence and illegal persecution would cease. This may explain why the numbers of Jews seeking to emigrate temporarily dropped after the Nuremberg Laws were enacted. But in reality the Nuremberg Laws brought about a grave deterioration in the situation of most Jews and also had a considerable impact upon how Jews came to be regarded by their Aryan compatriots.

Continuing persecution

In November 1935, Jews previously protected from dismissal because of their service in the First

World War were dismissed from public office. Between 1936 and 1937, the pace of anti-Semitic legislation appeared to decelerate and no major initiatives were taken with regard to the Jewish question. For example, during the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games, anti-Semitic posters were temporarily taken down, so as not to draw the attention of foreign visitors and commentators to the anti-Semitic nature of the regime. Yet new decrees were still passed, marginalising Jews both from the economy and from society. The Jews were systematically and deliberately pauperised in a process known as the Aryanisation of the economy, which excluded Jews from employment and forced them to close down their businesses or to sell them at giveaway prices.

A host of other measures were employed and laws passed to isolate and humiliate the Jews and to separate them physically from the rest of the population. For example, in July 1938, streets named after Jews were renamed and park benches were designated for Aryans only. By November 1938, Jews were prohibited from going to the theatre, concerts and exhibitions. They were also excluded from certain restaurants. With each successive anti-Semitic measure, contacts between Jews and Aryans were minimised, formalised or banned, leading to a spatial separation of the Jews from the rest of German society.

Kristallnacht

Anti-Semitic policy shifted gear during the night of 9–10 November 1938, when Josef Goebbels, minister of propaganda, unleashed a pogrom known as *Kristallnacht* (the ‘Night of Breaking Glass’). Goebbels used the murder of Ernst von Rath, a

Gauleiter: regional leader of Nazi Party.

Questions

- To what extent were the actions taken against Jews in 1933–39 legal?
- How significant is the distinction between racial and religious anti-Semitism?
- If the Nazis believed so strongly in Jewish inferiority, why did they cover up the evidence of anti-Semitism during the 1936 Olympics?
- How strong is the evidence that the Nazis enjoyed popular support for their anti-Jewish measures?

German official in Paris, by a young Polish Jew, Hershel Grynspan, as a pretext for the pogrom. Some 7,000 Jewish businesses were destroyed, almost every synagogue in the country was burned down, 26,000 Jewish men were sent to concentration camps at Buchenwald, Dachau and Sachsenhausen, and 91 people were killed during the course of the pogrom. Fire brigades were instructed not to extinguish fires in Jewish properties.

Kristallnacht represented a decisive turning point in Nazi anti-Semitic policy. It was an unprecedented, widespread and violent act of persecution that took place in full view of the German public. Goebbels claimed that the pogrom was a spontaneous popular response on the part of the German nation to the murder of von Rath. But it was, in reality, a centrally planned and orchestrated action. The reactions of the German people were mixed. Some people were appalled at the violation of law and order that the pogrom represented. But most people responded with apathy. While few people engaged actively in the plundering and wanton destruction carried out by the party activists and SA squads, most were also either

unwilling or unable to do anything to oppose the violence. In addition, with very few exceptions, the representatives of both the Protestant and Roman Catholic Churches remained silent.

The aftermath

After *Kristallnacht*, with the violent shattering of their homes, businesses and synagogues, German Jews could no longer ignore or accommodate Nazi anti-Semitism, hoping that it would cease. With each earlier measure, Germany's Jews had reacted by adapting to their worsening situation. But *Kristallnacht* changed this response. Emigration became a priority, even to those Jews who had previously opposed the idea. After the pogrom, an atonement payment of 1 billion Reichmarks was imposed upon the Jews. This was a great humiliation and degradation for the Jews, who were held responsible for the damage.

Following *Kristallnacht*, Jews were excluded from the economy and the solution to the Jewish question was placed in the hands of the SS. The Jews were also marked out or distinguished much more clearly. In January 1939, their papers and passports were stamped with a red 'J', and all Jews had Israel (for men) and Sara (for women) added to their documents as compulsory first names. By the beginning of 1939, Jews had been forced into Jewish quarters in the cities, into Jewish houses, where many families lived together in cramped conditions. The process of **ghettoisation** had begun. In his famous speech to the Reichstag on 30 January 1939, Hitler predicted that, if the Jews once again brought about a world war, then the result would be 'the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe'.

The Second World War and the Final Solution

Once the Second World War broke out in September 1939, the situation of Germany's Jews

pogrom: organised violent persecution of an ethnic group.

SS (*Schutzstaffel*): paramilitary protection squad and Hitler's elite force. They organised and administered the concentration camp system and the Final Solution.

ghettoisation: enforced segregation of people into a separate living area.

Chronology

April 1933	National Boycott of Jewish Businesses and Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service.
September 1935	Nuremberg Laws.
November 1938	<i>Kristallnacht</i> .
January 1939	Hitler's Reichstag speech predicting 'the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe'.
September 1939	Outbreak of the Second World War.
September 1941	German Jews forced to wear the Yellow Star.
January 1942	Wannsee Conference.

deteriorated rapidly, as they were deprived of whatever rights and dignity they had left. For example, a curfew was imposed upon them and their radio sets were confiscated. In September

Final Solution: Nazi mass murder of European Jews.

genocide: state policy of deliberately killing a nationality or ethnic group.

Julius Streicher (1885–1946)

School teacher who joined the Germany Army in 1914 and won the Iron Cross.

- 1919** Helped to establish the Deutsch Soziale Partei, an anti-Semitic organisation.
- 1920** Deutsch Soziale Partei became part of NSDAP (National Socialist German Workers' Party).
- 1923** Founded, and was editor of, *Der Stürmer* (1923–45), a publication used to raise hatred of Jews, whom he blamed for unemployment and inflation.
- 1925** Became *Gauleiter* of Franconia.
- 1940** Stripped of his Nazi Party offices for printing false stories about Hermann Goering.
- 1946** Executed for war crimes after being found guilty at Nuremberg War Crimes trials.

Streicher was deemed to have a low IQ (102) — very low for a school teacher! Some people considered him to be insane.

1941, the Jews were forced to wear the Yellow Star, to mark them out, finally, from the rest of the German population. They were subsequently deported to death camps in Poland where they shared the fate of the rest of European Jewry in the Nazis' systematic extermination process, the **Final Solution**.

The Wannsee Conference, convened by Reinhard Heydrich in January 1942, both retrospectively sanctioned killings already underway and paved the way for the **genocide** of the European Jews.

Who initiated anti-Semitic policies?

During the first 6 years of Nazi rule, anti-Semitic policy derived from several different individuals and power centres.

- First, Hitler himself played a significant role. He gave direction to policy, but was not necessarily the main protagonist in its execution. The ambivalent nature of his leadership on the 'Jewish question' led to initiatives on the part of various other individuals and agencies.
- Second, the civil service bureaucracy played an important role in both shaping anti-Semitic legislation and in curbing party extremists.
- Third, the Nazi Party acted as a power centre, using the Jewish question to gain control of the administration of the state. The party constantly stirred up the Jewish question at all levels to assert its power.
- Fourth, high-profile Nazi leaders such as Josef Goebbels, Hermann Goering and Julius Streicher also played a key role during these years.
- Finally, Heinrich Himmler and the SS played an increasing role in instigating and implementing anti-Semitic policy, particularly after the *Kristallnacht* pogrom. Once the war began, anti-Semitic policy developed a radicalising momentum and the genocide of European Jewry became a reality.

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Further study

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