

The Holocaust Reading Notes

10 Historical Core Concepts

1. Pre-War Jewry
2. Antisemitism
3. Weimar Republic
4. Totalitarian State
5. Persecution
6. U.S. and World Response
7. The Final Solution
8. Resistance
9. Rescue
10. Aftermath

Pre-War

- Jews were living in every country in Europe before the Nazis came into power in 1933.
- Approximately 9 million Jews
- Poland and the Soviet Union had the largest populations
- Jews could be found in all walks of life: farmers, factory workers, business people, doctors, teachers, and craftsmen

Antisemitism

- Jews have faced prejudice and discrimination for over 2,000 years.
- Jews were scapegoats for many problems. For example, people blamed Jews for the “Black Death” that killed thousands in Europe during the Middle Ages.
- In the Russian Empire in the late 1800s, the government incited attacks on Jewish neighborhoods called *pogroms*. Mobs murdered Jews and looted their homes and stores.
- Hitler idolized an Austrian mayor named Karl Lueger who used antisemitism as a way to get votes in his political campaign.
- Political leaders who used antisemitism as a tool relied on the ideas of racial science to portray Jews as a race instead of a religion.

- Nazi teachers began to apply the “principles” of racial science by measuring skull size and nose length and recording students’ eye color and hair to determine whether students belonged to the “Aryan race.”
- The film, *Europa, Europa*, was the winner of the Best Foreign Film Golden Globe in 1991. It is based on the true story of Solly, a Jewish teenager, trying to survive in Nazi Germany.
- Solly becomes a Hitler Youth and is in a Nazi racial science lecture when the teacher uses him to demonstrate who is a true “Aryan” student.

Weimar Republic

- After Germany lost World War I, a new government formed and became the Weimar Republic.
- Many Germans were upset not only that they had lost the war but also that they had to repay (make reparations) to all of the countries that they had “damaged” in the war.
- The total bill that the Germans had to “pay” was equivalent to nearly \$70 billion.
- The German army was limited in size.
- Extremists blamed Jews for Germany’s defeat in WWI and blamed the German Foreign Minister (a Jew) for his role in reaching a settlement with the Allies.
- The German mark became worth less than the paper it was printed on—hyperinflation occurred.
- Nearly 6 million Germans were unemployed.

Totalitarian State

- Totalitarianism is the total control of a country in the government’s hands
- It subjugates the individual’s rights.
- It demonstrates a policy of aggression.
- In a totalitarian state, paranoia and fear dominate.
- The government maintains total control over the culture.
- The government is capable of indiscriminate killing.
- During this time in Germany, the Nazis passed laws which restricted the rights of Jews: Nuremberg Laws.

- The Nuremberg Laws stripped Jews of their German citizenship. They were prohibited from marrying or having sexual relations with persons of “German or related blood.”
- Jews, like all other German citizens, were required to carry identity cards, but their cards were now stamped with a red “J.” This allowed police to easily identify them.
- The Nazis used propaganda to promote their antisemitic ideas.
- One such book was the children’s book, *The Poisonous Mushroom*.

Persecution

- The Nazi plan for dealing with the “Jewish Question” evolved in three steps:
 1. Expulsion: Get them out of Europe
 2. Containment: Put them all together in one place—namely ghettos
 3. “Final Solution”: annihilation
- Nazis targeted other individuals and groups in addition to the Jews:
 - Gypsies (Sinti and Roma)
 - Homosexual men
 - Jehovah’s Witness
 - Handicapped Germans
 - Poles
 - Political Dissidents
- *Kristallnacht* was the “Night of Broken Glass” on November 9-10, 1938
- Germans attacked synagogues and Jewish homes and businesses

U.S. and World Response

- The Evian Conference took place in the summer of 1938 in Evian, France.
- 32 countries met to discuss what to do about the Jewish refugees who were trying to leave Germany and Austria.
- Despite voicing feelings of sympathy, most countries made excuses for not accepting more refugees.

- Some American congressmen proposed the Wagner-Rogers Bill, which offered to let 20,000 endangered Jewish refugee children into the country, but the bill was not supported in the Senate.
- Antisemitic attitudes played a role in the failure to help refugees.

- The *SS St. Louis*, carrying refugees with Cuban visas, were denied admittance both in Cuba and in Florida. After being turned back to Europe, most of the passengers perished in the Holocaust.

Final Solution

- The Nazis aimed to control the Jewish population by forcing them to live in areas that were designated for Jews only, called *ghettos*.
- Ghettos were established across all of occupied Europe, especially in areas where there was already a large population of Jews.
- Many ghettos were closed by barbed wire or walls and were guarded by SS or local police.
- Jews sometimes had to use bridges to go over Aryan streets that ran through the ghetto.
- Life in the ghettos was hard: food was rationed; several families often shared a small space; disease spread rapidly; heating, ventilation, and sanitation were limited
- Many children became orphaned in the ghettos.
- *Einsatzgruppen* were mobile killing squads made up of Nazi (SS) units and police. They killed Jews in mass shooting actions throughout eastern Poland and the western Soviet Union.
- On January 20, 1942, 15 high-ranking Nazi officials met at the Wannsee Conference to learn about how the Jewish Question would be solved.
- The Final Solution was outlined by Reinhard Heydrich who detailed the plan to establish death camps with gas chambers.
- Death camps were the means the Nazis used to achieve the “final solution.”
- There were six death camps: Auschwitz-Birkenau, Treblinka, Chelmno, Sobibor, Maidanek, and Belzec.
- Each used gas chambers to murder the Jews. At Auschwitz prisoners were told the chambers were “showers.”
- Most of the gas chambers used carbon monoxide from diesel engines.
- In Auschwitz and Maidanek “Zyklon B” pellets, which were a highly poisonous insecticide, supplied the gas.
- After the gassings, prisoners removed hair, gold teeth and fillings from the Jews before the bodies were burned in the crematoria or buried in mass graves.

- There were many concentration and labor camps where many people also died from exposure, lack of food, extreme working condition, torture, and executions.

Resistance

- Despite the high risk, some individuals attempted to resist Nazism.
- The “White Rose” movement protested Nazism, though not Jewish policy, in Germany.
- The White Rose movement was founded in June 1942 by Hans Scholl, 24-year-old medical student, his 22-year-old sister Sophie, and 24-year-old Christoph Probst.
- The White Rose stood for purity and innocence in the face of evil.
- In February 1943, Hans and Sophie were caught distributing leaflets and were arrested.
- They were executed with Christoph 4 days later.
- Other famous acts of resistance include the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising (*Uprising*), Sobibor escape (*Escape from Sobibor*), *Sonderkommando* blowing up Crematorium IV at Birkenau (*The Grey Zone*), and Jewish partisans who escaped to fight in the forests.

Rescue

- Less than one percent of the non-Jewish European population helped any Jew in some form of rescue.
- Denmark and Bulgaria were the most successful national resistance movements against the Nazi’s attempt to deport their Jews.
- In Denmark 7,220 of the 8,000 Jews were saved by ferrying them to neutral Sweden.
- The Danes proved that widespread support for Jews could save lives.
- The War Refugee Board was established by the U.S. Secretary of Treasury Henry Morgenthau, Jr., and it worked with Jewish organizations, diplomats from neutral countries and European resistance groups to rescue Jews from Nazi-occupied territories.
- Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg worked in Hungary to protect tens of thousands of Jews by distributing protective Swedish (a neutral country) passports.

Aftermath

- Soviet soldiers were the first to liberate camp prisoners on July 23, 1944, at Maidanek in Poland.
- British, Canadian, American, and French troops also liberated camp prisoners.
- Troops were shocked at what they saw.
- Most prisoners were emaciated to the point of being skeletal.
- Many camps had dead bodies lying in piles “like cordwood.”
- Many prisoners died even after liberation.
- Many of the camp prisoners had nowhere to go, so they became “displaced persons” (DPs).
- These survivors stayed in DP camps in Germany which were organized and run by the Allies.
- Initially, the conditions were often very poor in the DP camps.
- Jewish displaced persons, eager to leave Europe, pushed for the founding of a Jewish state in British-controlled Palestine.
- U.S. President Harry Truman issued an executive order allowing Jewish refugees to enter the United States without normal immigration restrictions.
- The Nuremberg Trials brought some of those responsible for the atrocities of the war to justice.
- There were 22 Nazi criminals tried by the Allies at the International Military Tribunal
- Twelve subsequent trials followed as well as national trials throughout formerly occupied Europe.
- The International Military Tribunal took place in Nuremberg, Germany in 1945 and 1946.
- 12 prominent Nazis were sentenced to death.
- Most claimed that they were only following orders, which was judged to be an invalid defense.
- Why study the Holocaust?