

The following passages introduce historical topics that directly impacted the lives of these young writers.

Antisemitism and Race

Antisemitism had long been part of life in Europe. Wilhelm Marr, a German journalist, coined the word antisemitism in 1879 to describe the hatred of Jews as members of a separate and dangerous “race.” The term combined older stereotypes about Jews and Judaism with the racist thinking of the 19th century. In earlier times, Jews were hated because they refused to accept the religion of the majority. Often times Jews who converted, or so the reasoning went, were no longer outsiders. They belonged. By the late 1800s, racists saw every Jew, regardless of his or her religious beliefs, as an outsider, because conversion does not alter one’s race. Today most scholars regard race as a meaningless scientific concept; human beings, regardless of their so-called race, are more genetically alike than different. Genetic differences within “races” are greater than those between the races.

In the 1800s, the few scientists who tried to show the flaws in racist thinking were ignored. For example, after studying seven million Jewish and Aryan children, the German Anthropological Society concluded in 1886 that the two groups were more alike than different. Historian George Mosse writes:

“This survey should have ended controversies about the existence of pure Aryans and Jews. However, it seems to have had surprisingly little impact. The idea of race had been infused with myths, stereotypes, and subjectivities long ago, and a scientific survey could change little. The idea of pure, superior races and the concept of a racial enemy solved too many pressing problems to be easily discarded.”¹

Hitler’s Rise to Power

In the early 1930s, a worldwide depression intensified feelings against Jews and other minorities. It was a time of stress and uncertainty. In such times, many people are attracted to simple answers to complex problems and blame the “other” in the society for the crisis.

In Germany, the allegation that Jews were responsible for all of the nation’s problems was fostered by groups like Adolf Hitler’s National Socialist, or Nazi Party. In speech after speech, they maintained that the Jews were everywhere, controlled everything, and acted so secretly that few could detect their influence. The charge was without historical validity, but after hearing it again and again, most came to believe it.

In 1933, the Nazis took control of Germany after democratically winning more seats in the *Reichstag*, Germany’s parliament, than any other political party. Once in power, they began to turn Germany into a “racial state” by eliminating the nation’s “racial enemies”—particularly, the Jews. Hitler proclaimed 42 anti-Jewish measures in 1933 and 19 more in 1934. Each was designed to protect “Aryan blood” from contamination with “Jewish blood.” Then in 1935, three new laws were announced in Nuremberg. These laws stripped Jews of citizenship and

¹ *Toward the Final Solution: A History of European Racism* by George Mosse. Fertig, 1978, p. 92.

isolated them from other Germans by outlawing marriages between Jews and citizens of Germany.

The Nuremberg laws raised an important question: Who is a Jew? On November 14, 1935, the Nazis defined a Jew as a person with two Jewish parents or three Jewish grandparents. Children of intermarriage were considered Jewish if they followed the Jewish religion or were married to a Jew. They were also Jews if they had one parent who was a practicing Jew. In the years that followed, the Nazis would apply similar racial laws not only to Jews but also to “Gypsies” and Germans of African descent. Increasingly, they defined people solely by their ancestry.

German Expansion

By 1938, Hitler and his Nazi party had been in power for five years. During those years, they carried out their vision of a racial state, step by step. If a measure encountered little or no opposition, they went a little further next time. They advanced their plans for a new German empire in a similar way. On March 11, 1938, German troops entered Austria, the country of Hitler’s birth.

When no country publicly denounced the invasion, the Nazis turned their attention to Czechoslovakia. That fall, they took over parts of the country. In their newly acquired territories, the Nazis quickly applied their racial laws. Hitler’s plan for territorial expansion was called *Lebensraum* or living space. This plan necessitated a greater expansion of territory under German control which Hitler believed was crucial for Germany’s continued existence and its economic self sufficiency. Jews in Greater Germany during this time tried desperately to emigrate only to encounter stumbling blocks. The Nazis did not stand in their way. They were happy to let the Jews go as long as they left behind their money and possessions. Few nations, however, were willing to admit penniless Jewish refugees.

On September 1, 1939, the Nazis invaded Western Poland and much of this territory was annexed to the Third Reich. Two days later, in response to the invasion of Poland, Britain and France entered the war and World War II was officially declared. By 1940, the Nazis occupied the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway, Belgium, Luxembourg, and France. In June 1941, the Nazis invaded Eastern Poland and continued their assault into the U.S.S.R.

The Creation of Ghettos

By 1940, the Nazis began deporting German Jews to Poland and forced them to live in ghettos. Following further occupations in Western Europe and with the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, the rate of deportations to ghettos rapidly increased. Ghettos were enclosed districts of a city in which the Germans forced the Jewish population to live under miserable conditions. Ghettos isolated Jews by separating Jewish communities both from the population as a whole and from neighboring Jewish communities. Jews were no longer free to go about their daily lives but were forced to live in unsanitary conditions and subsist with extremely limited food rations. The Warsaw Ghetto, established on October 12, 1940, was the largest Jewish ghetto, in both area and population. There, more than 350,000 Jews—about 30 percent of the city’s population—were eventually confined in about 2.4 percent of the city’s total area. Other major urban areas inside and outside of Poland established ghettos. Some of the largest in Poland were in the cities of Kovno and Lodz. Other large ghettos were in Vilnius, Lithuania and Terezín, Czechoslovakia.

The Nazis also created the *Judenrat*, or Jewish Councils, within each ghetto. The *Judenrat* was often comprised of Jewish leaders from their respective communities who were entrusted with implementing Nazi policies within the ghetto. A Jewish Police force was also formed to enforce such policies. Individuals who served in either capacity did so under tremendous duress, often for the sake of obtaining a larger food ration and a chance of surviving one more day.

The “Final Solution”

The Nazis’ decision to systematically murder the Jewish people cannot be linked to a specific date or order. The genocide of the Jews was implemented in incremental stages and was a culmination of Nazi laws over a decade, from 1933 - 1945. Under the leadership of Adolf Hitler, the Nazis instituted state-enforced racism resulting in anti-Jewish legislation, boycotts of Jewish-owned businesses and the *Kristallnacht* (“Night of Broken Glass”) pogroms, all of which aimed to systematically isolate the Jews from German society and drive them out of Germany.

Following the occupation of Poland and the start of World War II, the Nazi policy to encourage emigration, expropriate Jewish property, and eventually consolidate populations into ghettos in the *Generalgouvernement* (a territory in central and eastern Poland in which the Germans established a civilian government) evolved into a comprehensive plan to eventually annihilate European Jewry. After *Operation Barbarossa* (the German invasion of the Soviet Union), *Einsatzgruppen* (mobile killing units) began killing operations aimed at entire Jewish communities. Over 1.5 million Jews were murdered at the hands of the *Einsatzgruppen*. The SS, the elite guard of the Nazi state, soon regarded the mobile killing methods—mainly shooting or gas vans—as inefficient and as a psychological burden on the killers. On July 31, 1941, Hermann Goering authorized Reinhard Heydrich to make preparations for the implementation of a “complete solution of the Jewish question” that became known as *Aktion Reinhard*.

Six extermination camps were established in Poland as part of *Aktion Reinhard*—Chelmno, Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka, Majdanek and Auschwitz-Birkenau. Because the majority of European Jews lived in Poland and Eastern Europe, the geographic location was optimal as it was the essential link to the rail lines. The first, Chelmno, (operating from December 1941 - March 1943) used mobile gas vans to murder Jews en masse. Jews were sent upon arrival directly to the gas chambers at Belzec (operating from March 17, 1942 - December 1942), Sobibor (April 1942 - October 14, 1943, shut down following an inmate revolt), and Treblinka (operating from July 23, 1942 - April 1943). At the largest camp, Auschwitz-Birkenau, established on April 27, 1940, three camps in one existed: Auschwitz I, a concentration and labor camp; Auschwitz II, or Auschwitz-Birkenau, where more than a million Jews perished; and Auschwitz III, known as Buna-Monowitz (taking its name from the Buna synthetic-rubber factory at Monowice, which slave laborers built for I. G. Farben, the German industrial firm.) The sixth, Majdanek was a slave labor and death camp and was in operation from October 1941 until it was the first liberated camp by Soviet troops on July 24, 1944.

The Nazis systematically murdered over three million Jews in the extermination camps. In its totality, the “Final Solution” resulted in the murder of approximately six million Jews, two-thirds of the Jews living in Europe before the start of the war; up to 250,000 Gypsies (or Roma and Sinti people; up to 10,000 homosexuals; and thousands of Communists, labor union leaders, Jehovah Witnesses, and the mentally and physically disabled.