

## **Section IV: The Nazi Holocaust: Genocide Against the Jews**

### **Background Materials**

[This section is reprinted from the California State Model Curriculum for Human Rights and Genocide, 1988, itself adapted from the Connecticut curriculum.]

Hitler and Nazi Germany formulated two goals from 1939-1945: a military victory over Allied nations, including the United States; and genocide against the Jewish People. The Germans called this latter plan the "Final Solutions." By the end of World War II, approximately 11 million civilians died, among them six million Jews.

Nazism built on a tradition of European anti-Semitism. The idea of pluralism – that all religions should peacefully coexist – was not a value in pre-modern time (before the eighteenth century). Thus, pre-modern anti-Semitism took the form of accusations against the Jews for not accepting Christianity as a true religion.

Modern anti-Semitism, by contrast, entails the notion that Jews have assimilated into society only to manipulate it through the control of wealth and power. Further, the Nazis added a \*racial\* dimension to this theory: They claimed that Jews carry within them a hereditary inferiority which, like a germ, could be passed to the German people. Hitler exploited this form of anti-Semitism to rally the German People. The Nazis also applied racist idea of innate inferiority to Slavs, Gypsies, blacks, and others whom they considered "antisocial". The German people were especially vulnerable to this kind of demagoguery in the aftermath of World War I. The German nation was economically destitute and was experiencing for the first time in its political history a democratic form of government. There were many forces within Germany that wished to dismantle this government that had been imposed on them by the Allies.

The Nazis persecution of the Jews dated from the first days of Hitler's rule. April, 1933 marked the beginning of government-initiated boycotts of Jewish shops, lawyers and doctors. By September 1935 the Nazis had passed laws which deprived Jews of German Citizenship and outlawed marriage between Jews and Christians. The Nazis, apparently aware that their treatment of Jews could not be condoned by democratic nations, relaxed many of the anti-Jewish "Nuremberg Laws" during the summer of 1936 when the Olympic Games were in Berlin. When the Olympic events were over, however, harsh treatment was revived and intensified. On November 10, 1938, the anti-Semitic campaign came to a head when the Gestapo organized "spontaneous" anti-Jewish demonstrations throughout Germany. Great violence broke out. Synagogues, shops and homes were smashed, burned and looted. The Nazi plan called for arresting "as many Jews, especially the rich ones... as can be accommodated in the existing prisons... Upon their arrest, the appropriate concentration camps should be contacted immediately, in order to confine them in these camps as soon as

possible.” This was “Crystal Night” (*Kristallnacht*), so called because of all the glass that was shattered. After this, systematic plans went into effect and, one by one, all remaining freedoms and human rights of Jews were eliminated by the passage of laws.

The German Jews and, after the war began and Germany took control in other countries, Jews from all over Europe were taken away, first to ghettos in Eastern Europe, then to concentration camps where they were abused, worked to death, or murdered. Before most Jews were taken to the concentration camps, they were first transported east, concentrated in ghettos in the cities of Eastern Europe, while “Aryanization”, or confiscation of Jewish property, occurred. From February 1940 until the liquidation of the last ghetto in August 1945, they were deprived of food, clothing, fuel, medicine, sanitary facilities, and even sleep.

A typical month’s food rations for one person consisted of less than one and one half pounds of meat, one egg, twelve ounces of potatoes, and two ounces of cheese, for which people worked long hours. Children and the elderly were not issued ration cards. Therefore, leaders of the Jewish community had to collect and distribute the food themselves to assure that all would be allowed to eat.

Jews lived six to a room. Plumbing, toilets and the sewage system were overused and broken down. Disinfectants and soaps were practically nonexistent. The only thing that relieved the congestion was death. In Warsaw 5,000 people died each month. In Lodz, 30,000 died in the first year. In all, 550,000 died in the ghettos. It was the intention of the Nazi government that the Jews die in ghettos, but eventually those who refused to die were taken to concentration camps instead.

As the German troops advanced eastward, the *Einstazgruppen*, a paramilitary force, followed, performing their terror and systematic savagery. Jews and others deemed “undesirables” were cleaned out. Prominent Jewish citizens were called out. All were forced to surrender their valuables, and were marched away to a place for execution. After digging their own deep trenches and surrendering their clothing, they were shot. Thus the East European Jewish culture which had existed since the sixteenth century was brought to an end.

Millions of people died in more than thirty Nazi concentration camps. Auschwitz, where four huge gas chambers and crematoria allowed the Nazis to kill 6,000 people a day, is perhaps the best known, but others such as Treblinka and Belsec and smaller camps at Riga, Vilna, and Minsk were also the sites of great suffering and death. In the *Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, William L. Shirer describes the horror of the concentration camps while pointing out how the Nazis tried to cover their function:

...The gas chambers themselves and the adjoining crematoria, viewed from a short distance, were not sinister looking at all: It was impossible to make them out for what they were. Over them were well-kept lawns with flower borders; the signs at the entrance merely said BATHS. The unsuspecting Jews

thought they were simply being taken to baths for delousing to the accompaniment of sweet music... Inside the "shower-room" – and perhaps this was the first moment that they may have suspected that something was amiss, for as many as two thousand of them were packed into the chamber like sardines, making it difficult to take a bath – The massive door was slid shut, locked and hermetically sealed. Up above were the well-groomed lawn and flower beds almost concealed the mushroom-shaped amethyst-blue crystals of hydrogen cyanide, or Zyklon B... It took some moments for the gas to have much effect. But soon the inmates became aware that it was issuing from the perforation of the vents. It was then that they usually panicked, crowding away from the pipes and finally stampeding toward the huge metal door where... They piled up in one blue clammy blood-spattered pyramid...

The full range of the cruelty and barbarism of the concentration camps came to light only after the war ended. People were treated like animals, like objects, they were killed by the millions. A few inmates did survive and through their words we have an important perspective on life in the camps.

Although the Western press carried stories about the Final Solution, many people did not believe that they were being committed. In general, there was very little response from the nations of the world to the plight of the Jews. Conferences were held and organizations created, but no larger-scale action was taken. The United States, just recovering from the depths of the depression and worried about international politics, did not modify its immigration laws to allow Jews to enter the country. In fact, during the period of Nazi rule, only a small percentage of the quota allowed under the U.S. immigration policy was permitted to enter the country.

From 1933 only 476,930 aliens entered the United States from all the countries in the world, and only 138,000 of them were Jews escaping Nazi persecution. The immigration laws could have allowed about 1.5 million to enter the United States during that time.

England, in an attempt to placate the Arabs and protect her interests in the Middle East, limited immigration to Palestine and admitted only 9,000 refugee children from Germany. Some Baltic countries actually assisted the Nazis in carrying out the "Final Solutions".

Danish and Swedish citizens, however, showed what could be done. Their assistance to the Jews is a testament to the ideals of heroic and humane behavior. The Danish people cooperated to protect the Jews, with the result that in some communities fewer than 10 percent of the Jews sought out by the Germans for deportation were actually apprehended. Six thousand Jews were hidden in and around Copenhagen while a rescue mission was set up. An expedition of Danish fishing boats secretly ferried Jews to Sweden:

*... The organizers of the expedition were private people who simply made themselves available for the task at a moment's notice... doctors, school teachers, students, businessmen, taxi drivers, housewives... They faced considerable problems to make sure that the Jews were moved undetected to the beaches and loaded safely on the vessels... Not a single ship was sunk... Some of the organizers were arrested, a few were subjected to a rifle fusillade... When it was over... Danish Jewry was safe in Sweden.*

Sweden, a neutral county during the war, exerted her influence to save the Jews from Germany and German-occupied countries. Raoul Wallenberg, a Swedish diplomat, entered Budapest, Hungary in July 1944. Though he was wealthy, sophisticated Christian who had never had much contact with the Jewish, Wallenberg risked his life, and did not stand by passively to witness the mistreatment and murder of Jews:

*Wallenberg arrived in early July. The Swedish minister had already begun the rescue effort by issuing six hundred provisional passports to Jews who had personal or commercial ties to Sweden. Wallenberg expanded the scheme radically. He printed a protective passport of his own elaborate design complete with official seals and the triple-crown insignia of Sweden. It stated that the bearer awaited emigration to Sweden and, until departure, enjoyed the protection of the government. Wallenberg persuaded the Hungarian authorities to respect five thousand of these homemade passports. He worked around the clock to build a city-wide relief organization, establishing hospitals and soup kitchens. He employed four hundred Jews to staff them... Neither the Germans nor their Hungarian allies wished to antagonize the neutral Sweden so no direct action was taken against him.*

In January, 1945, Wallenberg promised not to return to Sweden until the property of the Jews in Hungary, [then] liberated from the Nazis by the Russians, was restored to them. He has not been seen or heard from since meeting with the Russian General Malinovsky at that time.

There were other non-Jews throughout Europe who overcame fear for their own lives to save Jews from continued persecution and death. And there were other forms of resistance, by both Jews and non-Jews, against the Nazis. The Jews were able to circumvent many of the restrictions and prohibitions meant to deprive them of their physical existence and their cultural heritage. They smuggled food and medicine into the ghettos, sabotaged factories where they were forced to work supplying the Nazi war machine, published newspapers, kept diaries, warned neighbors of forced labor round-ups, refused to report for deportation to the camps, ran underground schools, and observed the traditions of their religion, all despite the knowledge that the consequence of the discovery was death. In the ghettos, staying alive itself was a form of resistance to the Nazis' attempt to exterminate them.

Some Germans also resisted, hiding Jewish families and sharing their food rations, risking death. The White Rose organization, were formerly members of the Nazi youth movement who had become disturbed by the constant public beating and deportation of the Jews. Their aim was to expose the lies of the Nazis. They could not obtain weapons or take control of communication centers, but they did get the news up by printing and distributing leaflets.

Two thirds of the Jews in Europe died in the Holocaust. The thousands who were liberated from camps at the end of the war were left homeless and helpless. IT was not until the State of Israel was established that the logjam of the Jewish displaced persons (DPs) was broken. Jews who remained in Eastern Europe found they could no longer support the needy among them. Disease, starvation, and death were common place. Jews remaining the Soviet Union faced all these plus the denial of rights to express their language and culture in schools, theaters, newspapers and journals and many restrictions on the practice of their faith.

In November 1945, Twenty-two major German Leaders and three organizations were brought to trial before the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg, Germany. In the Nuremberg proceedings, medial doctors, judges, government officials, industrialist and military officers and other individuals were tried. Many claimed that they did not know that Jews as a class were being exterminated and that they were simply obeying orders from their superiors. Some claimed that Allies committed similar crimes. The tribunal did not accept this argument and said that guilt should be determined not on the basis of whether or not a superior had given an order, but rather on whether or not the person had an opportunity to make a moral choice.