1933-1939: Early Stages of Persecution

Considering historical context helps us to understand the precedents and circumstances that contributed to the Holocaust. The following article examines German history between 1933 and 1939, paying close attention to the activities of the Nazi Party. It is reprinted courtesy of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC.

On January 30, 1933, Adolph Hitler was named chancellor, the most powerful position in the German government, by the aged President Hindenburg, who hoped Hitler could lead the nation out of its grave political and economic crisis. Hitler was the leader of the right-wing National Socialist German Workers Party (called "the Nazi Party" for short). It was, by 1933, one of the strongest parties in Germany, even though—reflecting the country's multiparty system—the Nazis had won only a plurality of 33 percent of the votes in the 1932 elections to the German parliament (Reichstag).

Once in power, Hitler moved quickly to end German democracy. He convinced his cabinet to invoke emergency clauses of the constitution that permitted the suspension of individual freedoms of press, speech, and assembly. Special security forces—the Gestapo, the Storm Troopers (SA), and the SS—murdered or arrested leaders of opposition political parties (Communists, socialists, and liberals). The Enabling Act of March 23, 1933—forced through the Reichstag already purged of many political opponents—gave dictatorial powers to Hitler.

Also in 1933, the Nazis began to put into practice their racial ideology. The Nazis believed that the Germans were "racially superior" and that there was a struggle for survival between them and inferior races. They saw Jews, Roma (Gypsies), and the handicapped as a serious biological threat to the purity of the "German (Aryan) Race," what they called the master race.

Jews, who numbered about 525,000 in Germany (less than one percent of the total population in 1933) were the principal target of Nazi hatred. The Nazis identified Jews as a race and defined this race as "inferior." They also spewed hate-mongering propaganda that unfairly blamed Jews for Germany's economic depression and the country's defeat in World War I (1914-1918).
In 1933, new German laws forced Jews out of their civil service jobs, university and law court positions, and other areas of public life. In April 1933, laws proclaimed at Nuremberg made Jews second-class citizens. These Nuremberg Laws defined Jews, not by their religion or by how they wanted to identify themselves, but by the religious affiliation of their grandparents. Between 1937 and 1939, new anti-Jewish regulations segregated Jews further and made daily life very difficult for them. Jews could not attend public schools; go to theaters, cinema, or vacation resorts; or reside or even walk in certain sections of German cities.

Also between 1937 and 1939, Jews increasingly were forced from Germany's economic life. The Nazis either seized Jewish businesses and properties outright or forced Jews to sell them at bargain prices. In November 1938, the Nazis organized a riot (pogrom), known as Kristallnacht (the "Night of Broken Glass"). This attack against German and Austrian Jews included the physical destruction of synagogues and Jewish-owned stores, the arrest of Jewish men, the vandalization of homes, and the murder of individuals.

Although Jews were the main target of Nazi hatred, the Nazis persecuted other groups they viewed as racially or genetically "inferior." Nazi racial ideology was buttressed by scientists who advocated "selective breeding" (eugenics) to "improve" the human race. Laws passed between 1933 and 1935 aimed to reduce the future number of genetic "inferiors" through involuntary sterilization programs: 320,000 to 350,000 individuals judged physically or mentally handicapped were subjected to surgical or radiation procedures so they could not have children. Supporters of sterilization also argued that the handicapped burdened the community with the costs of their care. Many of Germany's 30,000 Roma (Gypsies) were also eventually sterilized and prohibited, along with Blacks, from intermarrying with Germans. About 500 children of mixed African-German backgrounds were also sterilized. New laws combined traditional prejudices with the racism of the Nazis, which defined Roma by "race" and as "criminal and asocial."

Another consequence of Hitler's ruthless dictatorship in the 1930s was the arrest of political opponents and trade unionists and others whom the Nazis labeled "undesirables" and "enemies of the state." Some 5,000 to 15,000 homosexuals were imprisoned in concentration camps; under the 1935 Nazi-revised criminal code, the mere denunciation of a man as "homosexual" could result in arrest, trial, and conviction. Jehovah's Witnesses, who numbered at least 25,000 in Germany, were banned as an organization as early as April 1933, because the beliefs of this religious group prohibited them from swearing any oath to the state or serving in the German military. Their literature was confiscated, and they lost their jobs, unemployment benefits, pensions, and all social welfare benefits. Many Witnesses were sent to prisons and concentration camps in Nazi Germany, and their children were sent to juvenile detention homes and orphanages.

Between 1933 and 1936, thousand of people, mostly political prisoners, were imprisoned in concentration camps, while several thousand German Roma were confined in special municipal camps. The first systematic round-up of German and Austrian Jews occurred after Kristallnacht, when approximately 30,000 Jewish men were deported to Dachau and other concentration camps, and several hundred Jewish women were sent to local jails. The wave of arrests in 1938 also included several thousand German and Austrian Roma.

Between 1933 and 1939, about half of the German-Jewish population and more than two-thirds of Austrian Jews (1938-1939) fled Nazi persecution. They emigrated mainly to the United States, Palestine, elsewhere in Europe (where many would be later trapped by Nazi conquests during the war),
Latin America, and Japanese-occupied Shanghai (which required no visas for entry). Jews who remained under Nazi rule were either unwilling to uproot themselves or unable to obtain visas, sponsors in host countries, or funds for emigration. Most foreign countries, including the United States, Canada, Britain, and France, were unwilling to admit very large numbers of refugees.

Gypsies (Roma):

Communists (Political Opponents):

Homosexuals:

Religious Minorities: