

4. WORLD WAR II

The Final Solution

As the Nazis tightened their hold on Europe, Hitler put his plans for German domination of the globe into effect. One important part of that plan concerned the Jews in Europe.

From the beginning of his political career, Hitler had hated Jews. After reading the crude theories of some nineteenth-century "scientists," Hitler developed a race theory that made the Jews the scapegoats for Germany's severe economic and political problems. Hitler also blamed the Jews for the German loss in World War I, the Treaty of Versailles, the Russian Revolution, and the spread of communism.

According to Hitler's theory, all true Germans belonged to the Aryan race, a pure and noble breed of northern Europeans. Hitler thought that the Germans were the highest of all Aryan peoples. He was convinced that German Aryans had to keep their race pure in order to be strong enough to conquer Europe and the world.

To Hitler the Jews were the greatest threat to the Aryans. He believed that the Jewish race was inferior to the Aryan in every way. The Jews would only dilute the Aryan race if they were allowed to continue living with Aryans.

From the moment that he gained power in Germany, Hitler worked to eliminate Jewish influence in the country. As with his other plans, Hitler took a step-by-step approach to achieving his goal.

The Nazi persecution of the Jews started in the early 1930s. At that time the Nazis organized boycotts of Jewish-owned businesses. Jews were forbidden to hold political office and were not allowed to attend schools and universities. A massive anti-Jewish propaganda campaign was started.

The Nazis stepped up their campaign against the Jews in 1935 when they passed the Nuremberg Laws. Under those laws, any person with one Jewish grandparent was defined as a Jew and was deprived of German citizenship. Marriages between Jews and non-Jews were prohibited.

For the most part, even those Germans who disagreed with Hitler's race theories

accepted the Nuremberg Laws. They thought that he only wanted to put certain restrictions on the Jewish way of life and believed that his actions did not constitute a real threat to Jews in Germany or in the rest of Europe.

It soon became clear, though, that Hitler had no intention of allowing Jews to coexist with Germans. After the Nazi successes at the beginning of World War II, persecution of the Jews increased.

In the early 1940s, Jews in Germany and in conquered areas such as Poland, France, the Netherlands, and Belgium were herded into small segregated areas of cities called ghettos. Their possessions were taken away, and they were forced to live as slave laborers. Many of them died of starvation or disease.

This, however, was only the beginning. As the Nazi military machine moved forward, Hitler decided to implement his plan for a "Final Solution" to the Jewish problem. He was no longer content with separating and enslaving the Jews. He would settle for no less than the complete extermination of the Jewish race.

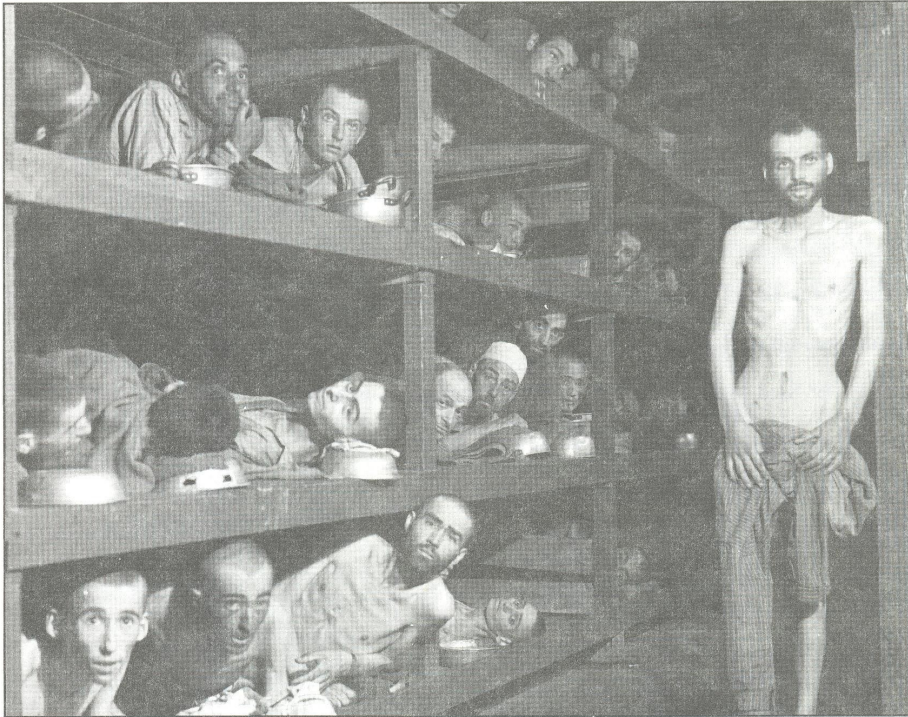
On January 20, 1942, the Nazis held a conference to decide the fate of Jews in Germany and in the conquered areas of Europe. At the conference, the Nazis decided to move all European Jews into concentration camps. In the camps, the Jews would be systematically killed. The complete elimination of the Jews of Europe became a primary Nazi goal.

Some of the concentration camps had been built in Germany before the war. Camps at Belsen, Dachau, and Buchenwald, for example, were already built at the time that plans for the Final Solution were put into place. Other camps were built in conquered areas. One of the largest concentration camps was at Auschwitz in Poland.

Across Europe Jews were forced onto trains and taken to the camps. Once in the camps, the "lucky" Jews were made to work as slaves. The others were simply killed in mass executions.

At first, most of the executions took place by firing squad. Later, the Nazis built huge gas chambers at many of the camps. In the chambers, Jews were poisoned and killed in large groups.

The Final Solution



The world was shocked by the reports of German atrocities committed on Jews in concentration camps such as this one at Dachau in western Germany.

The Nazis used the camps for other purposes as well. Nazi scientists at some camps conducted medical “experiments” with Jews. Thousands of Jews were disfigured or killed as a result of those activities.

The Nazis also conducted campaigns of persecution and execution against other groups that they believed diluted the German race. For example, between 400,000 and 500,000 gypsies were killed in Nazi concentration camps.

In all of the camps, mass extermination policies were ruthlessly carried out. At Auschwitz more than 2.5 million Jews were killed in gas chambers. At Buchenwald more than 100,000 Jews lost their lives. At Dachau some 3,500 people perished as a result of Nazi medical experiments and thousands more were executed.

Most people did not realize the full extent of Hitler’s anti-Jewish campaign until after the war, when most of the concentration camps were discovered. In the end,

about 6 million of the approximately 9,600,000 Jews living in the areas that the Nazis had captured were put to death in concentration camps. Nearly two-thirds of Europe’s Jews lost their lives as a result of Nazi policies.

The mass extermination of the Jews came to be called the Holocaust. Never before had so horrifying an event been uncovered. The Holocaust served notice that the Nazi regime had been more brutal than even the most vehement anti-Nazis had ever imagined.

The Holocaust also led many people to question the nature of humanity in the twentieth century. The systematic murder of millions of people seemed almost too horrible to imagine and led many people to ask serious questions: How could it have happened? Should the Allies have done more sooner to stop the slaughter? Could the Holocaust happen again? Those questions would haunt the world for the rest of the twentieth century.

