

Historical Context of Night

On January 30, 1933, Adolf Hitler was appointed chancellor of Germany. Within a few months, he established the first concentration camp at Dachau, and Communists, Socialists, and labor leaders were confined there. The camp became a training center for SS guards and officers who later ran other concentration camps. On August 2, 1934, Hitler declared himself Führer of Germany, and in 1935 he announced the Nuremberg Laws. These laws stripped Jewish Germans of their civil rights as citizens and defined Jews as a separate race. Many more laws were passed that set about defining the so-called Aryan race.

Kristallnacht occurred on November 9, 1938 at the order of Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels. Jewish synagogues, homes, and businesses were destroyed, and approximately 30,000 Jews were sent to concentration camps. On September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland, thus igniting World War II.

Jewish ghettos were immediately established in Poland, and Jews were required to wear the Star of David as identification. The ghettos were generally sealed off from the rest of the city with guarded barriers, and the penalty for a Jew to leave the ghetto was death. In 1941 the Nazi effort to exterminate the Jews began. Teams of firing squads, called Einsatzgruppen, followed the invading troops and shot Jews on the spot. This practice continued until the fall of 1942, resulting in approximately 1,500,000 murders. Hitler ceased this practice in favor of the more impersonal mass exterminations of the concentration camps.

Chelmno was the first death camp, and it began operating at the end of 1941. In January 1942, SS official Reinhard Heydrich proposed the Final Solution at the Wannsee Conference. All European Jews (approximately 11 million) would be

transported to concentration camps and exterminated. In addition all Russian prisoners of war and gypsies would be destroyed.

In 1942 camps at Auschwitz/Birkenau, Treblinka, Belzec, and Sobibór were opened in Poland and began killing trains full of prisoners as soon as they arrived. Hitler succeeded in keeping the concentration camps secret for most of the war. Jews believed that they were simply being resettled in the east. 2.7 million Jews died in concentration camps, and between 5.2 and 5.8 million were killed in all. Approximately 5 million other people (including Jehovah's Witnesses, homosexuals, gypsies, dissenting clergy, political prisoners) were killed also.

Although most of the concentration camps were closed at the end of 1943, Auschwitz continued to operate through the summer of 1944. Allied troops encircled Germany by the fall of 1944, and the Nazis tried to cover up their crimes by shutting the camps. At the end of 1944 and the beginning of 1945, the remaining prisoners were forced to walk to camps in the middle of Germany in "death marches." Thousands died.

Although most of the concentration camp prisoners follow Nazi orders, resistance groups did exist in both concentration camps and ghettos. Armed resistance generally took the form of guerilla warfare. In October 7, 1944, a resistance group succeeded in blowing up a crematory at Auschwitz, and resistance continued until the end of the war.