

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE HOLOCAUST AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF EUROPEAN ANTI-SEMITISM

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"Not all victims of the Nazis were Jews; but all Jews were victims."

Elie Wiesel

This quote used by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum comes from its first director to describe those who became victims of the Nazis and their regime. It refers to other victims [which include: Roma, homosexuals, persons who are handicapped and others]. To better understand Elie Wiesel's quote, we will take a brief look the development of European Anti-Semitism which has persisted in many forms for over two thousand years. Some have called anti-Semitism "the longest hatred".

This long history can be divided into the following eras: Religious Anti-Semitism based on teachings of the early church fathers and its growth throughout Europe the Middle Ages; and Racial Anti-Semitism, from late 19th century ideas of what "race" meant. We will take a brief look at how ideas developed; the power and use of "myths", false accusations and stereotypes; and what means were used to stir the "public" to action over such wide areas, so many countries, for so many centuries.

The racial anti-Semitism of the National Socialists (Nazis) in the twentieth century took hatred of Jews to a genocidal extreme. It began with words and ideas: stereotypes, sinister cartoons, and the gradual spread of hate; much of it mirroring ideas from centuries of European anti-Semitism. It is my hope that introduction will lead us to question how Nazi ideas could escalate and spread so quickly. Maybe understanding some of these 2,000 years of Jewish life in Europe will help us understand that Nazi ideology may have been planted in already fertile ground.

NOTE: See reference sheet on page 8 for excellent introductory movie at USHMM web site and brief supporting articles; plus other useful resources.

Outline

I. 2000 Year History

A. Jewish Life in Europe before 20th Century

1. Since Roman times Jews lived in major cities in Western Europe & around the Mediterranean creating active communities developing rich cultural, education, religious life and economic life
2. In Middle Ages Jews were expelled from most Western European countries 1150 – 1500. Had lived under charters granted by local rulers and kings
3. Golden Age of Jews in Spain under Moslem rule ends with expulsion in 1492 Christian kings
4. Jews were invited to move to Poland by the king starting in late 13th century
 - a. Established communities in small towns and Jewish quarters in cities
 - b. Developed communal life, became Poland's middle class merchants

- c. Communities continued despite uprisings & killings in mid-14th century
- 5. Jews were permitted to reestablish communal life in various counties by beginning of modern era

B. Development of Religious Anti-Semitism in the Middle Ages

1. Early Christian leaders developed doctrine that all Jews were responsible for death of Jesus
 - a. Not renounced until 1960s when the Second Vatican Council officially repudiated the ancient charge that Jews had murdered Christ.
2. Various “**myths**” were circulated –
 - a. Despite being completely false, some appeared in many places over 100’s of years.
 - b. **Blood libel** – first 1144 in Norwich England [continued into 20th century] charged Jews are commanded to murder Christian children and to use their blood to prepare *Matzot* (Passover bread). This “myth” was repeated in various countries through the 20th century.



Medieval etching, depicting Jews committing a purported ritual murder, was featured on the front page of the Nazi weekly *Der Stürmer* 1939

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
<https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa1120782>

- b. **Host Desecration** - The Medieval Christian belief that Jews would steal and defile the consecrated wafer used to celebrate mass.

[See next page for 15th Century German woodcut with explanation]



Desecration of host [Public Domain](#) [view terms](#)

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Descreationofhost.gif> ([en>User:Goodoldpolonius2](#))

A 15th century German woodcut that shows an “alleged host desecration”. In the first panel the hosts are stolen, in the second the hosts bleed when pierced by a Jew, in the third the Jews are arrested, and in the fourth they are burned alive.

Panels from a woodcut showing the alleged desecration of the Host by Jews in Passau, Bavaria:

- a) Jews (with badges) carry a box containing the host into the synagogue.
- b) Blood flows from the Host when pierced by a Jew.
- c) The Jews are arrested...
- d) ... and burned. From: *Beyond the Pale* exhibit. German woodcut

3. These “myths” and the following actions led to much religious discrimination and anti- Jewish riots

- a. Jewish sacred books were burned in public squares; Talmud burned 1244 in Paris and 1553 in Italy by Church authorities
- b. 1215 Fourth Lateran Council decrees Jews had to wear Jewish badge or later hat
- c. 1348-1355 Black Death / Plague - Jews were accused of “poisoning the wells”
- d. Many cities required Jews to live in separate quarters
- e. 1516 first formal Ghetto established in Venice, Italy
 - Jewish quarter, where all Jews had to live
 - Non-Jews could also live there
- e. Riots killed many 1,000’s

4. Economic discrimination

- a. Jews forbidden to own land or join trade guilds; forced into restricted work, like money lending, dealing with second hand goods
5. Church leaders preaching discrimination
- a. 1095 – Pope Urban II – First Crusade to free Jerusalem from Infidel; slaughtered thousands of European Jews on the way [through other Crusades]
 - b. 1543 Martin Luther - “*On the Jews and Their Lies*” – preaches against the Jew.
6. 1648-1649 Chelmnitzki Massacres, Cossack and peasant uprising against Polish rule in Ukraine; 100,000 Jews killed, 300 communities destroyed.

C. Modern Era - Life for European Jews and Jewish communities [starting mid - late 18th Century]

1. 19th Century –Era of Emancipation and invitation to return to forbidden areas in West
 - a. Walls of ghettos opened
 - b. Many Jews “joined” western society, schools, developed businesses, a few became international bankers
2. “Emancipation” of Jews: Eastern Europe (Russia - Poland) late 19th – early 20th centuries. [After this there were still “spontaneous” riots or *pogroms*]
 - a. Rich communal, religious, cultural life, often amidst poverty
 - b. Development of modern literature in Yiddish, and Hebrew
 - c. Developed modern political Zionism & socialism ideas

D. Late 19th – Era of Racial Anti-Semitism

1. Racial Supremacy theories –
 - a. Jews are a Race; an inferior race. [In contrast to medieval times – where Jew could convert to Christianity and avoid all discrimination]
 - b. Based on pseudo-scientific “evidence”
2. 1894 Alfred Dreyfus Affair – in France; Jewish officer in French Army wrongly accused of treason
3. ***Protocols of the Elders of Zion*** – Myth of Jewish international conspiracy first appeared in 1903 in Russia, generated support for theories of an international Jewish conspiracy.
 - a. Translated into many languages, and distributed throughout 20th century

II. Modern Era

A. Developments in Germany in late 19th and early 20th centuries

1. Racial supremacy theory, Aryan race
2. German defeat in World War I, followed by severe and long depression

B. Development of National Socialist Workers’ Party (Nazi)

1. Started in 1919 with anti-Jewish planks, Hitler joins
2. 1923 Adolf Hitler led abortive coup for Nazis in Bavaria
3. 1923 Hitler wrote *Mein Kampf* - “My Struggle”
 - a. Democracy was a bankrupt facade for communism
 - b. Jews caused ruin of Germany in W.W. I by corrupting “pure” Aryan blood
 - c. Fatherland must seize land in “subhuman” areas to east

C. 1933 – there were 9,500,000 Jews in area of Europe Germans would occupy

D. 1933-1939 in Germany

1. 1933 Adolf Hitler appointed Chancellor of Germany
 - a. Dachau Concentration camp opens
 - b. Nationwide boycott of Jewish-owned businesses
 - c. No Jews in civil services, professors in universities, or school teachers
 - d. Laws permitted forced sterilization of Gypsies, people with mental and physical disabilities, African-Germans & others considered “unfit”
2. 1933-34 Youth *Aliyah* (Youth Immigration) brought first groups of Jewish children from Germany to the *Yishuv* (Jewish community in Palestine)
3. 1934 Hitler proclaims himself *Fuhrer* (Leader and Reich Chancellor)
 - a. First mass arrests of homosexuals in Germany
4. 1935 Nuremberg Laws strip Jews of citizenship; forbid marriage with Aryans
 - a. Jehovah’s Witnesses banned from civil service jobs & arrested
5. 1936 Sachsenhausen & 1937 Buchenwald Concentration Camps opened
6. 1936 all German children from age 10 had to join Hitler Youth
7. 1938 *Anschluss* of Austria (incorporation/ annexation)
8. 1938 *Kristallnacht* (Nov. 9-10) Night of Broken Glass
 - a. Nearly 30,000 Jewish men arrested /deported to Concentration Camps
 - b. Government seized all Jewish businesses
 - c. Nazi sympathizers burn synagogues and loot Jewish homes and businesses
9. 1938 -1939 (Nov. 28) Ravensbrück became Concentration Camp for Women
10. All Jewish students expelled from German schools; segregated schools created
11. 1938 Evian conference – 32 countries met in France to discuss refugee policies; most did not let Jews in
12. 1938-39 Efforts to rescue Jewish Children
 - a. *Kindertransport* (Children’s Transport) -10,000 Jewish children to Great Britain via Holland
 - Only about 20% were reunited with families after the war
 - b. *Brit Shalom*, Philadelphia based organization, rescues 50 Jewish children from Vienna
 - and brings them to United States- very few reunited with families
 - Largest organized group rescue of Jewish children to U.S.
13. 1939 Cuba and U.S. refuse to accept Jews aboard ship SS St. Louis
14. 1939: W.W. II begins, Sept. 1 Germany invades Poland
15. Sept. 21, 1939 Heydrich ordered establishment of ghettos in Poland
16. Hitler gives power to doctors to kill institutionalized people with disabilities in “euthanasia” program

E. 1940-1945

1. 1940
 - a. Germans occupy Denmark, Norway, Belgium, Luxembourg and France
 - b. May 7, Lodz Ghetto sealed: 165,000 people in 1.6 square miles
 - c. Nov. 16, Warsaw Ghetto sealed: ultimately had 500,000 people
2. 1941
 - a. Eichmann appointed head of department for Jewish affairs

- b. Germany occupies Yugoslavia, Greece and invades Soviet Union
 - c. Sept. 28-29 - 34,000 Jews massacred at Babi Yar by *Einsatzgruppen*, [mobile killing squads]
 - d. Establishment of Auschwitz II (Birkenau) & Chelmno death camps
 - e. November 1941, Terezin (Theresienstadt) Ghetto / Concentration Camp established in former Terezin fortress in Czechoslovakia.
 - f. Japanese attack Pearl Harbor, U.S. declares war on Japan & Germany
 - g. Gassing operations begin at Chelmno "extermination" camp in Poland
3. 1942
- a. Jan. 20, 1942 Wannsee Conference in Berlin; Heydrich outlines plan to murder Europe's Jews, the "Final Solution" of the "Jewish problem"
 - b. Nazi "extermination" camps located in occupied Poland begin mass murder of Jews at Auschwitz-Birkenau, Treblinka, Sobibor, Belzec and Majdanek in gas chambers
 - c. SS compound in the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp female prisoners
 - c. Deportation of Jews to killing centers from Belgium, Croatia, France, Netherlands, Poland, Germany, Greece and Norway
 - d. Jewish partisan units formed in forests of Pylorus & Baltic states
 - e. Armed resistance by Jews in ghettos of Kletz, Kremets, Lachva, Mir & Tuchin
4. 1943
- a. German 6th Army surrenders at Stalingrad
 - b. Liquidation of Krakow ghetto
 - c. Warsaw Ghetto Uprising - April 19- May 16, 1943
 - d. Himmler orders liquidation of all ghettos in Poland & Soviet Union
 - e. Jewish armed resistance in Bedzin, Bialystok, Czestochowa, Lvov & Tarnow Ghettos
 - f. Liquidation of large ghettos in Minsk, Riga & Vilna
 - g. Armed inmates revolt at Sobibor and Treblinka death camps
 - h. October-November rescue of Danish Jewry
5. 1944
- a. Germany occupies Hungary; all Hungarian Jews (430,000) sent to Auschwitz
 - b. Bergen-Belsen Camp authorities established a women's camp in 1944.
 - c. June 6, 1944 D-day: Allied invasion at Normandy
 - d. June 22, 1944: First documented gassing in the women's camp at Ravensbrück.
 - e. Red Army repels Nazi forces
 - f. Russians liberate Majdanek death camp
 - g. Revolt by inmates at Auschwitz, one crematorium blown up
 - h. Beginning of death march from Budapest to Austria
 - i. *Brihah* (escape) Movement begins to smuggle Jews out of Europe and into Palestine [1944-1948]

6. 1945

&

a. Evacuation and beginning of death marches from Auschwitz, Stutthof

Buchenwald

- January 27, 1945 Soviet Army liberated remaining 7,000 at Auschwitz

b. April 27, 1945: SS orders the final evacuation of the Ravensbrück

c. April 30, 1945: Soviet forces liberated Ravensbrück. They discovered 2,000 - 3,000 sick and dying prisoners.

d. April 30, 1945 Hitler commits suicide

e. May 8, 1945 V-E Day, Germany surrenders, end of Third Reich

f. 1945-52 Displaced Persons camps & centers opened in Germany, Austria and

Italy under administration by the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), with help from U.S. Army; often at site of former Concentration Camps.

- After war Jewish DP's were separated into own camps

g. Aug. 6 bombing of Hiroshima; Aug. 9 bombing of Nagasaki

h. Sept. 2, 1945 V-J Day, Japan surrenders, World War II ends

F. Modern Scholarship

Thirty plus years ago, researchers at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum began the grim task of documenting all the ghettos, slave labor sites, concentration camps and killing factories that the Nazis set up throughout Europe.

The researchers have cataloged over 44,000 Nazi ghettos and camps throughout Europe (under lining is mine), spanning German-controlled areas from France to Russia and Germany itself, during Hitler's reign of brutality from 1933 to 1945.

Reference: *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933–1945*, Geoffrey P. Megargee, Editor. Four volumes of seven are completed.

“The Final Solution would not have been possible without the pervasive presence and uninterrupted tradition of anti-Semitism in Germany. The exposure of the German people for generations to anti-Semitism in its manifold forms – political, nationalist, racial, cultural, doctrinal, economic – eventually rendered them insensitive to Hitler’s radical and deadly brand of anti-Semitism. It abounded in credos, platforms and declarations with the central thesis that Jews were alien to the German nation, its people, cultural and land, and that the rights which Jews had or sought should consequently be denied to them.” **Lucy Dawidowicz, historian**

**See page 8 for Resources and references for
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Resources:

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European Anti-semitism from Its Origins to the Holocaust

Film on European Antisemitism KEY RESOURCE

<http://www.ushmm.org/confront-antisemitism/european-antisemitism-from-its-origins-to-the-holocaust>

A component of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's Permanent Exhibition, this film introduces the origins of antisemitism—hatred of Jews—from the days of the early Christian church until the era of the Holocaust in the mid-20th century. The film prepares students for a discussion of why Jews have been targeted throughout history and how antisemitism offered fertile ground to the Nazis.

ANTISEMITISM IN HISTORY: FROM THE EARLY CHURCH TO 1400

<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007170>

ANTISEMITISM IN HISTORY: THE EARLY MODERN ERA, 1300–1800

<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007172>

ANTISEMITISM IN HISTORY: THE ERA OF NATIONALISM, 1800–1918

<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007173>

On Medieval Anti-Semitism

<http://alphahistory.com/holocaust/medieval-anti-semitism/>

Woodcuts and prints from Middle Ages re: Anti- Semitism

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_antisemitism#mediaviewer

Survivor Reflections and Testimonies

<https://www.ushmm.org/remember/holocaust-reflections-testimonies>