



NAZI IDEOLOGY

and the HOLOCAUST

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NAZI IDEOLOGY



BETWEEN 1933 AND 1945, GERMANY'S GOVERNMENT, LED BY ADOLF HITLER AND THE National Socialist (Nazi) party, carried out a deliberate, calculated attack on European Jewry. Basing their actions on antisemitic ideology and using World War II as a primary means to achieve their goals, they targeted Jews as their main enemy, killing six million Jewish men, women, and children by the time the war ended in 1945. This act of genocide is now known as the Holocaust. As part of their wide-reaching efforts to remove from German territory all those whom they considered racially, biologically, or socially unfit, the Nazis terrorized many other groups as well, including Roma (also known as Gypsies), Germans with mental and physical disabilities, homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Poles, and Soviet prisoners of war. In the course of this state-sponsored tyranny, the Nazis left countless lives shattered and millions dead.

Much has been written about what took place during the era of the Holocaust and where, when, and how the Nazis carried out their murderous plans. To fully comprehend the Nazis' actions, however, one must consider and understand the theoretical underpinnings that led them to conceive of such plans in the first place. In other words, what did the Nazis believe and how did they put their theories into practice?

Adolf Hitler formulated and articulated the ideas that came to be known as Nazi ideology. Born in a small town in Austria, Hitler had failed as an art student before becoming a corporal in the German army. Like many of his countrymen, he was embittered and humiliated by Germany's defeat in World War I and was further outraged by the terms of the Versailles Treaty, which had been signed in 1918 and which required the vanquished nation to give up vast territories and to pay heavy war debts.

Hitler joined the nascent Nazi party in the early 1920s, finding a political home among others who despised Germany's democratic Weimar government—established immediately following Germany's defeat in World War I—and who blamed Marxists and Jews for the country's problems. Hitler used his personal charisma to rise to the top of the radical, militant party, soon becoming its leader. Amid economic crisis and social unrest throughout Germany, the ranks of the Nazis swelled to 50,000 by 1923.

That same year, Hitler and the Nazi party attempted a coup, called the Beer-Hall Putsch, but failed to seize control of the government. In the trial that followed, Hitler was sentenced to five years in prison for treason. There, he wrote his political autobiography, *Mein Kampf* (*My Struggle*), in which he outlined his vision of a new future for Germany. In his book, Hitler stated that he first became an active antisemite during his formative years in Vienna, where he became familiar with social Darwinism. That theory sought to apply Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection to human society, imagining all of human history as a struggle for primacy between social groups, whether defined by race, ethnicity,

nation, or class. He also incorporated in his writing elements of Malthusian economics, a theory suggesting that the earth's finite ability to produce food, as well as its cycles of disease and natural disaster, inherently limited population growth. Finally, Hitler combined those theories with writing about the nationalist German notion of "blood and soil" (*Blut und Boden*), which glorified peasant life and idealized the land. From this composite of social, economic, historical, and mystical elements, Hitler adapted and skillfully propagated an ideology that put the necessity of racial struggle at the center of human affairs.

Hitler was convinced that he had found the key to comprehending an extraordinarily complex world. He believed that a person's characteristics, attitudes, abilities, and behavior were determined by his or her so-called racial makeup. In Hitler's view, all groups, races, or peoples (he used those terms interchangeably) carried within them traits that were immutably transmitted from one generation to the next. For better or for worse, no individual could overcome the innate qualities of race.

Although most people accept the notion of an *individual* human impulse to survive, Hitler, like other social Darwinists, believed that all members of a race or ethnic group shared a *collective* instinct for survival. In his view, the continuation of a race primarily depended on the ability of its members to pass on its innate characteristics to succeeding generations. This notion translated to an abhorrence of intermingling between peoples, because it would lead to the pollution of the distinguishing elements of the race and, in turn, to the degeneration of its very nature. According to this thinking, this process could, over time, threaten and potentially extinguish an entire race.

The second element in Hitler's theory of survival involved the need to acquire "living space" (*Lebensraum*). Each race, he asserted, was driven to struggle with others for room in which to grow and for resources on which to thrive. "Every being strives for expansion," he said in a speech in Erlangen, Germany, in November 1930, "and every nation strives for world domination." Those who were successful in this territorial competition would continue to expand their numbers, thereby overwhelming the smaller populations around them. The lesser races, weakened by a lack of living space, would eventually stagnate and die out. In the end, he judged the success or failure of each race by the size of its population and the area of territory it controlled: a great nation occupied a huge area of land; a weak one held little or none. The road map to racial survival depended not on peaceful coexistence with one's neighbors but on defeating them in the quest for limited resources.

In Hitler's mind, however, the struggle for survival was not a neutral contest in which all races were different but equally entitled to supremacy. Instead, he believed in a hierarchy of racial groups in which some were inherently gifted—possessed of traits such as integrity, intelligence, and beauty—whereas others were fundamentally flawed by nature

and were devious, stupid, or ugly. Because he held that all racial groups shared the same drive for collective survival (competing against one another for finite resources and space in which to grow), and because he thought that racial mixing diluted good characteristics and spread bad ones, Hitler viewed those races at the top of the hierarchy as being at risk of infiltration and destruction by those at the bottom. To survive, a superior race must not only separate itself from lesser ones but also continue to suppress and dominate those who would threaten to overtake it.

Hitler imagined himself as a savior, applying his theoretical construct of racial struggle to the specific case of Germany. He condemned the democratic Weimar Republic as weak and ineffectual. Moreover, he felt the country's leaders had led the nation dangerously astray and had corrupted the German soul by overemphasizing the intrinsic worth of the individual. To Hitler, individuality was an egoistic and culture-corroding value because it duped people into forgetting about and thereby relinquishing their role in the collective group, which he called "race-consciousness."

Hitler was not alone in his beliefs. Nationalist political movements in Germany and Austria tended to view the state as a collective entity, describing it as a "National Community" (*Volksgemeinschaft*). More-extreme racist nationalists saw the state as a "community of the people" (*völkische Gemeinschaft*), by which they meant not just a national but a racial group imbued with a mystical sense of shared blood and common fate. In such a framework, which Hitler wholeheartedly adopted, a person mattered only for the role he or she played in serving the racial community. Hitler planned to use his power to reeducate the people along those lines by suppressing any political or spiritual loyalty beyond that to the race-nation. He would thus reclaim for Germany its place among the nations and would ensure its collective survival.

The stakes of this racial "survival of the fittest" mentality were particularly high for Hitler and for those who adopted his views, because they believed themselves to be at the top of the hierarchy but threatened with infiltration and corruption by inferior peoples. They called themselves "Aryans," although the term, in fact, refers to the language spoken by Indo-Germanic settlers from Persia and India who migrated over centuries into Europe. The Nazis perverted the word's meaning to support racist ideas by viewing those of Germanic background as prime examples of "Aryan" stock, which they considered racially superior; the typical "Aryan" in the Nazi view was blond, blue-eyed, and tall. Additionally, for Hitler and the Nazis, a racial hierarchy existed even among so-called Aryan peoples, and they dubbed those of Nordic descent, especially "Aryan" Germans, as the ultimate "Master Race," gifted above all others by virtue of innate superiority. As such, the Nazis believed they were destined to rule a vast empire they called *Das Dritte Reich*, or the Third Reich

(the Nazis used this term to emphasize historical continuity—First Reich: the Holy Roman Empire of the German nation, 962–1806; Second Reich: Hohenzollern empire, 1871–1918; and the Third Reich, which would begin when the Nazi Party came to power).

Hitler painted for his countrymen a terrifying picture of this great race of “Aryan” Germans threatened with imminent danger because of the Weimar Republic’s misguided leadership following World War I. By opening the doors of the nation to members of those races that the Nazis considered innately inferior and by granting them equal rights as German citizens, Hitler argued that the republic and its predecessors had encouraged intermarriage between “Aryan” Germans and inferior foreigners. This racial intermixing, in turn, produced offspring whose undesirable racial traits contaminated the purity of the “Aryan” bloodline and who were unlikely, because of their race, to be loyal to Germany. To make matters worse, the republic had also permitted the unlimited reproduction of people whom Hitler considered biologically flawed, degenerate, or a negative influence on the health of the race as a whole. This reckless lack of respect for the law of nature, Hitler argued, posed a dire threat to the purity of the “Aryan” German race and, consequently, to its very existence. “By mating again and again with other races,” Hitler wrote in *Mein Kampf*, “we may raise these races from their previous cultural level to a higher stage, but we will descend forever from our own high level.”

Hitler and the Nazi party outlined in clear and unequivocal terms their racial enemies. Those races included Roma (Gypsies), Slavs, African Germans, and especially Jews. Likewise, people with physical and mental disabilities, viewed as “hereditarily unfit” Germans, were deemed a biological threat to the health of the nation. As the Nazis framed it, the particular threat each so-called enemy posed to the collective whole was slightly different, but the essence was the same. Building on age-old prejudice and suspicion, Nazi rhetoric made a case for the segregation and exclusion of those whom they considered a danger to their racial purity.

In Hitler’s mind, no group was more dangerous and more threatening than the Jews. Because he defined them as a race, he argued that they were instinctively driven to increase their numbers and dominate others. At the same time, he insisted that their methods of expansion were fundamentally suspect. Because Hitler tied racial continuation to territorial acquisition, he believed the Jews, who had no land of their own, should not exist at all. In fact, he theorized that when the Romans expelled the Jewish people from Israel more than 2,000 years ago and scattered them across the empire in what has come to be called the Diaspora, the Jews should have begun a long decline, ending ultimately in extinction. So why did they continue to exist and even thrive? Hitler concluded that they must have adapted to their landless environment and cultivated traits—such as cunning,

deviousness, and deceitfulness—that would ensure their survival. In so doing, their very existence in his view ran counter to nature and defied the intended course of human history.

Specifically, Hitler believed that the Jews escaped extinction by migrating and attaching themselves to existing states or communities, always pushing their own interests and exploiting the native people whose territory they entered. According to Hitler, the Jewish nature was the opposite of the “Aryan” Germans’ nature. Whereas the Nazis prized racial hierarchies and purity of bloodlines, the Jews, in his view, sought race-mixing, assimilation, and equality; whereas the Germans valued national strength and loyalty, the Jews weakened states by cultivating international businesses and financial institutions that fostered interdependence among nations. Hitler presented Jews as parasites, who used devious means, such as financial profiteering, media control, and race-mixing, to weaken the “host” nation, dull its race-consciousness, and reduce its capacity to defend itself. He voiced his view in a speech in Nuremberg in January 1923: “The internal expurgation of the Jewish spirit is not possible in any Platonic way, for the Jewish spirit is the product of the Jewish person. Unless we expel the Jewish people soon, they will have Judaized our people within a very short time.”

Hitler believed that the Soviet Union was the first country in which the Jews had triumphed and that the Jews were using the Communist state to enslave the Slavic population. Like other Nazi leaders and right-wing nationalist politicians, he imagined that Jews were creating conditions necessary for a Soviet revolutionary takeover in Germany: massive unemployment, hunger, and homelessness. In his view, then, rather than a legitimate political and economic structure, communism was a tool devised by Jews to disguise their dominance and control of the Slav and so-called Asiatic peoples of eastern Europe and Eurasia. In the fact that two of every three European Jews lived in eastern Europe, Hitler found further corroboration for his view that the region had been infiltrated and taken over by the Jewish people.

Anti-Jewish paranoia was not original to Hitler or the Nazis. A fabricated publication called “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion”—first published in Russia in 1905—purported to document the secret plans of Jewish leaders who were conspiring to take over the world by, among other methods, controlling the international economy and the media. That work, conclusively dismissed as “clumsy plagiarism” by the London *Times* in 1921, nevertheless continued to circulate throughout Europe and the United States, thus providing support for worldwide antisemitic political movements. For Hitler, this distorted image of Jews as aggressors, quietly plotting to destabilize the state and secretly manipulating the forces that guide the government, justified and allowed preemptive action against them. As he expressed it in *Mein Kampf*, the threat was dire: “If, with the help of

Der Ojftgilg



Beschreibungen von Ernst Haeckel
Bilder von F. J. J.

1893

the Marxist creed, the Jew conquers the nations of the world, his crown will become the funeral wreath of humanity, and once again, this planet, empty of mankind, will move through the ether as it did thousands of years ago.”

Cover of a German antisemitic children's book (left), *Der Giftpilz (The Poisonous Mushroom)*, first published in Germany in 1935. This printing appeared in 1938. Even elementary schools became forums of political indoctrination and racial hatred. Nazi propaganda taught Germans to think in racist terms. GERMANY, 1938. USHMM COLLECTION

This view of Jews as Communists who had used their cunning to take over vast areas of eastern Europe fit neatly within Hitler's theories of territorial acquisition and population expansion. He contended that Germany was facing a dangerously low birth rate, largely because the lack of living space physically restricted the nation's growth. He and many other Germans blamed those problems on the Versailles Treaty, which forced Germany to give up thousands of square miles of valuable land to its neighbors, above all to Poland in the east and to France in the west. The result, as the Nazis saw it, was that Germany was losing the competition for land and population to the inferior Slavs, who occupied huge parts of the continent to the east.

To survive, Hitler argued, Germany must go to war, break the encirclement of the country by its enemies, reconquer the territory lost after World War I, and create a vast empire in the east. Despite the costs of war, the increased living space would provide Germany with the lands needed to expand its population and with the resources necessary to elevate it to world-power status. In the threatening and urgent language so characteristic of Nazism, Hitler warned that the opportunity was almost lost. If “Aryan” Germans did

not act decisively, they would come under the control of the Communist Jews and, in turn, be swept away by the masses of barbaric, uncivilized Slavs to the east.

For Hitler, German conquest would also destroy—once and for all time—the enemy of all peoples: the Jews. Hitler preached a simple tautology: on the one hand, the destruction of the Jews would weaken the Soviet state and facilitate the conquest of new living space for Germany; on the other hand, the realization of Germany’s natural claim to territory in the east would deal a decisive defeat to international Jewry. In the context of this ideological war against the Soviet Union, the Nazis planned and implemented the Holocaust.

Hitler’s theories led to the persecution of so-called inferior races inside Germany and, following the onset of war, the subjugation of various groups throughout the new German empire. The successful realization of his ideas, however, depended on the complete cooperation and unity of the National Community, which was to be made up of race-conscious “Aryan” Germans who accepted, obeyed, and conformed with Nazi ideology and social norms. Hitler and the Nazis demanded the public’s unconditional obedience, tolerating no criticism or dissent. Indeed, they saw it as their duty to conduct a perpetual “self-purge” of society, rooting out those who failed to support their views and help realize their vision. For this reason, those who rejected Nazi ideology, even if they were considered racially pure “Aryan” Germans, found themselves in grave danger.

A German Jewish schoolboy (right) wears the compulsory yellow Star of David. BERLIN, GERMANY, 1942. USHMM, COURTESY OF YAD VASHEM PHOTO ARCHIVES

For Adolf Hitler and those who adopted his theories and embraced his views, a race-conscious government naturally needed to tend to its survival imperatives: to identify

German conquest, for Hitler,

would also destroy those he perceived

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and segregate races, to subdue so-called inferior peoples and promote the reproduction of superior ones, and to go to war to seize territory from neighboring nations. Moral and legal considerations were irrelevant, Hitler cautioned, for the iron law of nature dictated that the strong take from the weak. By virtue of their racial superiority, Germans had the right—indeed the duty—to suppress and eliminate the racial threats in their midst and to seize territory from the Slavs and to repopulate it with “Aryan” Germans. By doing so, Hitler insisted, they were following their own natural instincts and serving the progress of humanity. In the end, Hitler’s program of war and genocide stemmed from what he saw as a hard equation of survival: “Aryan” Germans would have to expand and dominate, a process requiring the elimination of all racial threats—especially the Jews—or else they would face extinction themselves.

ENEMIES OF THE REGIME:

Political Opponents, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Homosexuals



ADOLF HITLER, THE ONETIME STRUGGLING LEADER OF THE RADICAL FRINGE NAZI movement, was appointed Reich Chancellor of Germany by President Paul von Hindenburg on January 30, 1933. The decision came as a surprise to the nation, especially because the president was under no obligation to put Hitler in power. The Nazis—although Germany’s largest political party in the national elections of 1932—did not command a majority in parliament (called the *Reichstag*) and, therefore, did not have the votes to form a government on their own. Furthermore, President von Hindenburg disliked Hitler personally and had in the past resisted naming him chancellor for fear that the move would result in a one-party dictatorship. At the same time, Hindenburg was exhausted by Germany’s seemingly endless and unresolved political, economic, and constitutional crises.

Advancing in age, Hindenburg was ready to become an elder statesman, freed from the daily responsibility of governing the country. His advisers, who were close to the German Nationalist People’s Party, told him that by appointing Hitler chancellor he would create a Nazi–Nationalist coalition, which would effectively end Hitler’s career as a radical outsider and vocal critic of the Weimar government, stabilizing it in the process. Hindenburg was further reassured that conservative and nationalist elements in the Reichstag would use their political savvy to keep the Nazi party in check. Despite deep misgivings, the president took the fateful step, persuaded that Hitler could be controlled.

Hindenburg’s advisers could not have been more wrong. Hitler and the Nazis had no intention of being managed by the president or anyone else. Indeed, with his role as chancellor secured, Hitler saw his way clear to take the troubled nation in hand. Recalling a key element of his campaign platform, he triumphantly declared the establishment of the National Community (*Volksgemeinschaft*), which the Nazis envisioned as a unified race of “Aryan” Germans under their leadership. Hitler then moved carefully—operating both inside and outside the legal framework of the constitution—to organize the police power necessary to enforce his long-term policies of racial purification and European conquest.

As a first step, the Nazis set out to crush political opposition inside Germany. In 1933, the priority enemies were the Communist and Social Democratic Parties, politicians, and trade union leaders. The Nazis began by identifying individual political opponents; branding them enemies of the German nation and dangerous obstacles to its recovery; and systematically attacking, persecuting, and suppressing them in the name of national peace.

In addition to political opponents, the Nazis identified and targeted spiritual resisters (Jehovah’s Witnesses) and so-called social deviants (especially homosexuals). Nazi theory

held that those people, insofar as they were “Aryan” Germans, were worthwhile members of the social order who had lost their sense of their intrinsic racial value and, in consequence, had drifted away from the National Community. German society would welcome them back, provided they embraced Nazi ideology and accepted the roles and responsibilities that came with their racial status. Although in practice the Nazis moved harshly and often with lethal outcome against activist leaders and others who resisted their authority, they expected, in accordance with their racist view, that the rank and file—perhaps after time in a concentration camp—would see the light and fall in with the collective. Those who persistently refused to be reformed were to be further terrorized and punished as a warning to other recalcitrant offenders, and, if necessary, to be removed from society.

Communists being held at gunpoint (right) by a member of the Sturmabteilung (SA) after a mass arrest of political opponents of the Nazi regime. BERLIN, GERMANY, MARCH 6, 1933. WITH PERMISSION OF THE BUNDESARCHIV

POLITICAL OPPONENTS

Hitler inaugurated his regime with a wave of public violence against political opponents. The brutality was carried out by members of the Nazi paramilitary formations, namely the SA (*Sturmabteilung*) also known as storm troopers, and the SS (*Schutzstaffel*), the elite guard of the Nazi party. On February 22, 1933, Hitler’s second in command, Hermann Göring, inducted members of the SA and the SS into the police as auxiliaries, giving them

As a first step, the Nazis set out to crush political opposition inside Germany.



license to arbitrarily beat or kill people whom they deemed to be opponents. In response to expected protests over the Nazi takeover, Göring ordered the police to shoot to kill all Communist demonstrators. In individual spontaneous acts of violence or in locally organized waves of persecution, Nazi party faithful assaulted those whom they perceived to be enemies of the regime. Street battles, such as “Bloody Sunday” in February 1933, left one Communist dead and hundreds wounded. A few months later, during a violent spree that came to be called the “Week of Blood,” Nazi thugs killed dozens of political opponents in Berlin alone.

On the night of February 27–28, 1933, 24-year-old Marinus van der Lubbe, an unemployed bricklayer and recent arrival in Germany from Holland, set fire to the Reichstag, the German parliament building, in protest against Nazi persecution of the Communists. Although he acted on his own, van der Lubbe had been a member of the Communist youth movement. Hitler and Joseph Goebbels, Nazi party district leader (*Gauleiter*) of Berlin, seized the opportunity to portray the incident as being a signal for an armed Communist uprising against the state. That very night, German police arrested and detained 4,000 Communists and Social Democrats.

The following day, under the pretext of national security, Hitler—counting on the support of his Nationalist coalition partners—persuaded President von Hindenburg to issue a decree that suspended German constitutional provisions guaranteeing basic individual rights, including freedom of speech, assembly, and the press. The new law also permitted dramatically increased state and police intervention into private life, allowing officials to censor mail, listen in on phone conversations, and search private homes without either a warrant or the need to show reasonable cause. Most important, under the state of emergency established by the decree, the Nazi regime could arrest and detain people without cause and without limits on the length of incarceration. Within a few months, the German police had arrested and incarcerated more than 20,000 people in Prussia alone.

The decree provided a legal basis to intimidate, persecute, and pass discriminatory legislation against political opponents (especially those in the Communist and the Social Democratic Parties), and it offered a pretext for targeting politically active Jews. With all of the Communist representatives under arrest and after intense intimidation and bullying by the Nazis, the remaining parties represented in the Reichstag passed the Enabling Act in late March 1933. That measure gave the Nazi government the authority to pass laws and issue decrees without parliamentary consent. By divesting itself of legislative authority, the Reichstag effectively legalized a dictatorship and became a rubber stamp for the Nazi regime. By mid-July, a scant four and a half months later, the

Nazis were the only political party left in Germany. The others either had been outlawed by the government or had dissolved themselves under pressure. The government also abolished all trade unions, long the traditional supporters of leftist parties, thus forcing workers, employees, and employers instead to join the German Labor Front under Nazi leader Robert Ley.

In the months after the Nazis seized power, officials of the Secret State Police (*Gestapo*), often accompanied by members of the SA and SS, went from door to door looking for political opponents. They arrested and in some cases killed Socialists, Communists, trade union leaders, and others who had spoken out against the Nazi party. Within six months, nearly all openly organized opposition to the regime had been eliminated. Democracy in Germany was dead.

Leaders and members of the German Communist and the Social Democratic Parties and the left-wing trade unions were among the first to organize active underground resistance. Although those two parties had been rivals during the elections of the Weimar Republic, many of their members cooperated closely after the Nazis seized power. They were joined by individuals who had not been politically active before 1933 but who held socialist convictions or simply shared a desire to resist the Nazis.

Even though most of the German Communist Party leaders fled abroad or were imprisoned in 1933, remaining members met secretly and distributed illegal newspapers and leaflets produced on secret presses in Germany or smuggled in from neighboring countries. By 1935, the Gestapo had infiltrated most of the larger political opposition groups; mass arrests and trials as well as killings followed. By 1936, the regime had crushed virtually all organized left-wing opposition, including both large-scale operations and smaller resistance cells. Still, some Communist and Socialist activists continued their efforts, sabotaging the Nazis where they could and spreading their own ideals at great risk. In the end, however, they were no match for the overwhelming power of the Nazis: they never generated widespread support from the German population, nor did they seriously threaten the stability of the regime.

As part of its campaign to eliminate all potential political opponents, the Nazi regime also targeted Freemasons, made up of a variety of fraternal organizations with a long history as secret societies cultivating international connections. Using the tools of the masonry trade (the square and the compasses) to symbolize their moral and ethical ideals, many Masonic organizations had traditionally valued equality and freedom. To the Nazis, Freemasons warranted suspicion both because of their international connections (which the Nazis linked to a Jewish conspiracy) and because of their emotional ties to the French and American revolutionary movements (which also lauded both equality

before the law and respect for personal freedom). Not all Masonic lodges in Germany opposed Nazi rule, however; some sought—and failed—to survive by being accommodating to the regime.

In 1935, the practice of Freemasonry was abolished, and individual Freemasons were dismissed from the civil service. Then, in April 1938, Hitler gave them partial amnesty, and in September, low-ranking Freemasons were readmitted to the civil service. Nevertheless, the Nazis continued to harass Freemasons who participated in meetings and went to lodges. Most notably, during “The Night of Broken Glass” (*Kristallnacht*), the attack on Jewish homes, synagogues, and businesses on November 9–10, 1938, SA men were encouraged to paint anti-Masonic slogans on damaged shops and synagogues. Some Freemasons perceived by the Gestapo to be engaging in subversive political activity were imprisoned in concentration camps. With only 70,000 Freemasons in Germany in 1933, they were a small minority and did not pose any real threat to the government. Still, the Nazis insisted on targeting any group—no matter how small, neutral, or benign—that espoused views contrary to those of the regime.

In the name of Germany's Communist party, I call on all class comrades, even if you have not yet joined us. If you hate fascism and love freedom, join us in the common fight. If we, the workers and working class youth, whose hands create all value, stand together, shoulder to shoulder, if we fight together, we are unbeatable. If we fight together, we will sweep up with us in the united front against fascism millions of poor farmers in the countryside, and millions of employees, civil servants, and members of the middle classes from the cities!

ERNST THÄLMANN in *Sächsische Arbeiterzeitung* on February 27, 1933

On March 3, 1933, just five days after publishing those lines, ERNST THÄLMANN (right) was arrested in Berlin. As the leader of the German Communist Party from 1925 and a one-time candidate for the German presidency, Thälmann was targeted as part of the anti-Communist crackdown that followed the Reichstag fire. He spent most of the following 11 years held in isolation in prisons and concentration camps. On Hitler's orders, the SS transferred him to Buchenwald concentration camp, where he was murdered in August 1944. GERMANY, 1932–33. WITH PERMISSION OF THE SUE-

DEUTSCHER VERLAG BILDERDIENST

... Nazis insisted on targeting any group—

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that espoused views contrary to those of the regime.



The German authorities began establishing concentration camps soon after Hitler's appointment as chancellor in January 1933. Housed in hundreds of empty warehouses, factories, and other makeshift sites, the facilities were portrayed as temporary detention centers for the reeducation of political opponents. The reality, however, belied such euphemistic language. Individuals were imprisoned without trial or legal recourse and held for indefinite lengths of time under conditions of exceptional cruelty. Even so, the first camps should not be confused with either the wartime concentration camps and forced labor camps, which were created to exploit the labor of their inmates, or the killing centers, which were established to mechanize mass murder. Among the original concentration camps were Oranienburg, north of Berlin; Esterwegen, near Hamburg; Dachau, northwest of Munich; and Lichtenburg, in Saxony. By the end of July 1933, almost 27,000 people—virtually all of them political prisoners—were detained throughout Germany.

By the close of 1934, the German authorities disbanded most of those makeshift facilities. In their place, the SS established a centrally organized concentration camp system. The first of the SS-run camps was established on March 20, 1933, in an abandoned World War I munitions factory outside Dachau, which is located near Munich in southeastern Germany. Dachau served as the model for what was to become a vast SS-run organization that eventually included both labor camps and the killing center at Auschwitz-Birkenau. By 1939, the system consisted of six large concentration camps: Dachau (1933), Sachsenhausen (1936), Buchenwald (1937), Flossenbürg (1938), Mauthausen (1938), and Ravensbrück (1939). The latter was to house women prisoners.

Nazi persecution of political opponents exacted a terrible price in human suffering. Between 1933 and 1939, the criminal courts, run by the Ministry of Justice, sentenced tens of thousands of Germans for so-called political crimes. Gestapo officials often seized people upon their release from prison after serving their sentences and incarcerated them in concentration camps for indefinite periods as potential enemies of the state. In Nazi Germany, once targeted by the authorities, a suspected political opponent would find no protection from the judicial system. Guilt was determined by association and suspicion, rather than by evidence and proof; likewise, once convicted, the fate of an outcast was sealed without possibility of appeal.

After 1939, as the Nazis initiated new territorial conquests and had to manage larger and more diverse groups of prisoners, they rapidly expanded the camp system both in the number of inmates and in geographic locations. Concentration camps increasingly became sites where the SS killed targeted groups of real or perceived enemies of Nazi Germany. Between 800,000 and 1,000,000 non-Jewish inmates died in the concentration camp

system between 1933 and 1945. The majority of them were classified by the Gestapo as political prisoners. Like other prisoners, they were deployed at forced labor in service of state-owned, SS-owned, and private German industries. They died directly at the hands of the SS authorities or indirectly of starvation, disease, mistreatment, or accident as a result of the conditions under which they were forced to work.

JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

The Nazis targeted Jehovah's Witnesses in Germany because they placed their loyalty to God and to their faith above any allegiance to Hitler or the state. They saw themselves as citizens of a spiritual realm, the Kingdom of Jehovah, and their faith forbade them to swear allegiance to any worldly government. In the Nazis' view, those beliefs constituted an intolerable rejection of the National Community. Few in number, the Witnesses never posed a real threat to the stability of the Nazi government. But their dedication only to God and their refusal to abandon their beliefs made them dangerous in the eyes of a regime that tolerated no rivals. For the sake of their faith, Jehovah's Witnesses faced harassment, imprisonment, and the threat of death in Nazi Germany.

The Jehovah's Witnesses (before 1931 known primarily as the International Bible Students) were first organized as a Bible study group in Allegheny, Pennsylvania, in 1872 by Charles Taze Russell. The group sent missionaries abroad to seek converts in the 1890s and opened its first branch office in Germany in 1902. Their numbers grew rapidly; by 1926, more than 22,000 Germans followed the movement, the largest association of Witnesses outside the United States. By the early 1930s, as many as 35,000 Germans (of a population of 67 million) were members or interested sympathizers of this Christian denomination.

Despite their small numbers, the Jehovah's Witnesses were relatively visible in German society. A number of their beliefs and activities—namely, door-to-door evangelizing and distribution of religious tracts—made them stand out as nonconforming outsiders. The mainstream German Lutheran and Roman Catholic churches identified the Witnesses as heretics, and many people opposed the group's efforts to win converts. Even before Hitler's rise to power, some German states and local authorities had periodically sought to limit the group's proselytizing by charging its members with illegal peddling or disturbing the peace. Local German authorities had also, from time to time, banned the denomination's religious literature, which included the booklets *The Watch Tower* and *The Golden Age*. In the early 1930s, even before assuming power in Germany, Nazi party and SA fanatics, acting outside the law, disrupted Bible study meetings and beat up individual Witnesses.



The last photo of the entire KUSSEROW FAMILY (left). Standing from left to right are SIEGFRIED, KARL-HEINZ, WOLFGANG, parents FRANZ and HILDA, ANNEMARIE, WALTRAUD, WILHELM, and HILDEGARD. Seated are PAUL-GERHARD, MAGDALENA, HANS-WERNER, and ELISABETH.

Franz and Hilda Kusserow were practicing Lutherans during the early years of their marriage, but after World War I, they became Jehovah's Witnesses and raised their 11 children in their adopted faith. After 1931, the family moved to the small town of Bad Lippspringe in western Germany, where their home became the headquarters of a new congregation.

The Kusserows endured close scrutiny by the German secret police who repeatedly searched their home and confiscated their religious literature. Firm in their conviction that their highest allegiance was to God, the family members did not bend under the pressure of harassment and intimidation. They continued to carry out their missionary work, hosting secret Bible study meetings in their home, circulating religious material, and offering refuge to fellow Witnesses.

In 1936, Hilda was arrested and imprisoned for six weeks. Not long after her return home, Franz was detained. He would spend much of the next nine years in prisons and concentration camps. In 1939, the German police took away the three youngest Kusserow children—on the grounds that their moral welfare was being threatened by their family's faith—and put them in foster homes for so-called reeducation.

The eldest child, Wilhelm (named for German Emperor Wilhelm II) refused to join the German army after the onset of World War II, adhering to the commandment against killing. For this civil disobedience, he was tried and sentenced to death and was shot by a firing squad in Münster prison on April 27, 1940. In July of the same year, his brother Karl-Heinz was arrested by the Gestapo and sent to Sachsenhausen and then Dachau. Younger brother Wolfgang also refused to be inducted into the German army. He was apprehended in December 1941 and spent months in prison before being tried and convicted. On the night before his execution, he wrote to his family, assuring them of his devotion to God. Wolfgang was beheaded by guillotine in Brandenburg prison on March 28, 1942. He was 20 years old.

Hilda, Franz, and two of their daughters, Hildegard and Magdalena, were arrested in April 1941. After serving their respective prison terms, Hilda and Magdalena were each given the opportunity to return home if they signed a statement repudiating their beliefs; they refused. They eventually found each other and Hildegard at the Ravensbrück concentration camp, where they all remained until April 1945. On a forced march from the camp, they were liberated by the Soviets. The surviving family members were reunited after the war, but Karl-Heinz, who had been imprisoned for five years, died in 1945 as a result of maltreatment during his incarceration.

BAD LIPPSRINGE, GERMANY, CIRCA 1935. USHMM, COURTESY OF WALTRAUD AND ANNEMARIE KUSSEROW

From the outset of the Nazi regime, most Witnesses openly refused to conform. They would not raise their arms in the “Heil, Hitler!” salute; they ignored Nazi organizations such as the German Labor Front, which all German salaried workers had been compelled to join after the dissolution of the labor unions; and they failed to vote in elections or plebiscites sanctioning Hitler’s government. In April 1933, four months after Hitler became chancellor, the Nazi government in Bavaria banned the regional Jehovah’s Witnesses organizations. By that summer, most other German states had made it illegal for the Jehovah’s Witnesses to practice their faith and to produce and distribute their literature. Twice during 1933, police occupied the Witnesses’ offices and printing site in Magdeburg and confiscated religious literature. Witnesses defied Nazi prohibitions by continuing to meet and distribute their literature, often covertly. They made and shared copies of booklets smuggled into Germany, mainly from Switzerland.

The Jehovah’s Witnesses came under Nazi scrutiny not only for rejecting the regime’s authority but also for their alleged ties to the United States where the religion had been founded. The Nazis took their suspicions even further, linking Jehovah’s Witnesses to “international Jewry,” citing Witnesses’ refusal to remove references to the Hebrew Bible from their publications. Although the Nazis had grievances with many of the smaller Protestant denominations on similar issues, the Witnesses were the only group that refused to swear loyalty to the state or to bear arms for its cause. Their very real resistance to the government’s authority, compounded by their perceived connections to sworn enemies of the German state, made them visible targets in Nazi Germany.

Initially, the group’s leaders sought to avoid a standoff with the government, sending a letter in October 1934 that explained their core beliefs and reiterated their absolute loyalty to God. They stated that Jehovah’s Witnesses “have no interest in political affairs, but are wholly devoted to God’s Kingdom under Christ His King.” At the same time, the leaders did not shy away from firmly rejecting Nazi authority, writing the following:

There is a direct conflict between your law and God’s law, and, following the lead of the faithful apostles, we ought to obey God rather than men, and this we will do (Acts 5:29). Therefore this is to advise you that at any cost we will obey God’s commandments, will meet together for the study of His Word, and will worship and serve Him as He has commanded. If your government or officers do violence to us because we are obeying God, then our blood will be upon you and you will answer to Almighty God.

German authorities responded with economic and political harassment. From that date forward, Witnesses who continued to proselytize or who refused to participate in Nazi organizations lost their jobs and their unemployment and social welfare benefits; some were arrested.

The children of Jehovah's Witnesses also suffered. In some cases, teachers publicly humiliated them for refusing to give the "Heil, Hitler!" salute or to sing patriotic songs. Classmates shunned or even assaulted them, and in other instances, principals expelled them from schools. Witnesses' families were at risk because the state was empowered to judge whether parents were instilling the proper moral values in their children. The German courts ruled that it was the "task of the parents to provide their children with an upbringing that does not alienate them from German ways, raising their children in German customs and beliefs that morally and intellectually reveal the spirit of National socialism in the service of the people (*Volk*) and the National Community." German judges sometimes harshly applied a portion of the 1931 German Civil Code, which stated that child endangerment could be proven if, under parental influence, a young person behaved (or was likely to behave) in an immoral or dishonorable fashion.

Under the terms of the law, a teenager who refused to comply with Nazi norms of education, such as enrollment in the Hitler Youth, could unwittingly trigger an investigation of his or her parents. Social welfare bureaucrats could remove children from the custody of their parents on the grounds that their moral well-being was being jeopardized. In many cases, the authorities would put children in the homes of families whose beliefs reflected Nazi values; in other instances, young people were delivered into juvenile homes or correctional facilities despite having committed no crime. Parents who were Jehovah's Witnesses were forced either to inculcate in their children the beliefs that ran counter to their religious teachings or to risk losing them to the Nazi state. For their part, children found themselves facing a distinctly adult dilemma: what choice should they make when caught between love for their families and fear of punishment by the authorities? For many families, the price of remaining true to their beliefs and loyal to each other was high. From 1935 to 1938, more than 860 children were taken from their families on these grounds.

In April 1935, when the Nazi regime reintroduced military conscription, many Witnesses refused to serve or to perform war-related work. Furthermore, they tried to persuade others to ignore the summons. Although not pacifists, Jehovah's Witnesses saw themselves as soldiers in God's army and, therefore, would not bear arms for any nation. They had refused to fight in World War I, and they had been generally indifferent to the consequences of the lost war for Germany. Indeed, public memory of their passivity contributed



to hostility against them in a country still wounded by defeat and determined to reclaim its previous world stature. In response to Witnesses' disregard for the draft, the Nazi state dismissed all Jehovah's Witnesses from civil service jobs and made arrests across Germany. More than 200 men were tried by the Reich Military Court and executed for refusing military service or for undermining the integrity of the armed forces.

FRANZ WOHLFAHRT (left) was born into a Catholic family in 1920 in Köstenberg-Velden, Austria. Disillusioned with Catholicism, his parents became Jehovah's Witnesses during Franz's childhood and raised their children in their new faith.

Like other Jehovah's Witnesses, I refused to swear an oath to Hitler or to give the Hitler salute. Neighbors reported me to the police, but my boss protected me from arrest by saying that my work was needed. When the war began in September 1939, my father was arrested for opposing military service. He was executed in December. Following my twentieth birthday, I refused to be inducted into the German army. In front of hundreds of recruits and officers, I refused to salute the Nazi flag. I was arrested on March 14, 1940, and imprisoned. Later that year, I was sent to a penal camp in Germany. A new commander felt sorry for me; three times he saved me from execution between 1943 and 1945. He was impressed that I was willing to die rather than to break God's command to love our neighbor and not kill.

Franz remained in Camp Rollwald Rodgau 2 until March 24, 1945. He was liberated by U.S. forces and returned to his home in Austria. NO DATE OR PLACE GIVEN. USHMM, COURTESY OF FRANZ AND MARIA WOHLFAHRT

From 1935 onward, Jehovah's Witnesses faced renewed and intensified official discrimination. On April 1, 1935, the German government issued a national law banning the organization in Germany. In 1936, a special unit of the Gestapo began compiling a registry of all persons believed to be Jehovah's Witnesses, and informants began infiltrating Bible study meetings. In response to Nazi attacks against Witnesses, the International Society publicly supported the efforts of its brethren. At an international convention held in Lucerne, Switzerland, in September 1936, delegates from all over the world passed a resolution

condemning the Nazi regime. In that text and other literature brought into Germany, writers broadly indicted the Third Reich by denouncing its oppression of Jews, Communists, and Social Democrats; criticizing its remilitarization of Germany and the nazification of its schools and universities; and condemning its assault on organized religion.

By 1939, the Nazis had incarcerated an estimated 6,000 Jehovah's Witnesses (including those from incorporated Austrian and Czech lands). In the camps, where all prisoners wore identifying badges of various shapes and colors, Witnesses were marked by purple triangular patches. Even there, they continued to meet, pray, and seek converts. They clandestinely held study groups, met for prayers, and gave lectures to other prisoners. In Buchenwald, they set up an underground printing press and distributed religious tracts. Witnesses regularly smuggled editions of their publication *The Watchtower* into the Neuengamme concentration camp in northern Germany. SS guards shot at least one Jehovah's Witness after he was caught reading *The Watchtower* and refused to denounce his beliefs.

In keeping with their overall approach toward regime offenders who were perceived as racially valuable, the Nazi authorities promised freedom from personal harm in exchange for reconciliation with the National Community. For Jehovah's Witnesses, this offer meant renouncing their loyalty to God and swearing loyalty to Hitler and the Nazi regime. In some cases, the Nazis used negative pressure by badgering or even torturing the victim; in others, they offered incentives, promising release from prison or concentration camps for those who signed a document rejecting their own teachings. The declaration read:

I have come to know that the International Bible Students Association is proclaiming erroneous teachings and under the cloak of religion follows purposes hostile to the State. I have therefore left the organization entirely and made myself absolutely free from the teachings of this sect.... I will in the future esteem the laws of the State, especially in the event of war will I, with weapon in hand, defend the fatherland, and join in every way the community of the people.

The vast majority of Jehovah's Witnesses won the respect of their contemporaries for refusing to repudiate their beliefs.

Conditions in Nazi camps were generally harsh for all inmates, but Witnesses were uniquely sustained by the support they gave each other and by their belief that their struggle was part of their work for God. They generally earned the high regard of their fellow inmates by their dedication and by their efforts to alleviate the sufferings of those even worse off. Individual Witnesses astounded their guards with their refusal to conform to

military-type routines like roll call or the preparation of bandages for soldiers at the front. Instead, Jehovah's Witnesses sang hymns, preached to the guards, and continued to meet as best they could to sustain their emotional and spiritual strength.

Nazi persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses was not limited to Germany. Nazis targeted Witnesses throughout Europe during the course of World War II, arresting them in German-occupied Austria, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, the Netherlands, Norway, and Poland (some of them refugees from Germany) and deporting them to Dachau, Bergen-Belsen, Buchenwald, Sachsenhausen, Ravensbrück, Auschwitz, Mauthausen, and other concentration camps. At least 1,900 and possibly as many as 5,000 Jehovah's Witnesses are known to have been killed during the Nazi period. Until the liberation of the camps, those who survived continued their work among the survivors, winning converts.

HOMOSEXUALS

The Nazis' persecution of homosexual men was directly linked to their population policy and the role that they believed "Aryan" German men were to fulfill in the destiny of the Third Reich. Placing great importance on high birth rates that would expand the "Aryan" German race, the Nazis viewed men who fathered children as acting in the best interest of the National Community. Homosexual men, in contrast, were seen as degenerates whose conduct was responsible for declining birth rates in Germany. In a speech in 1937, SS leader Heinrich Himmler explicitly linked homosexuality to the fate of the nation, saying, "A people of good race which has too few children has a one-way ticket to the grave." In general, the Nazis viewed homosexuality not as a biological trait but as a behavioral choice that could be rejected or overcome. In most cases, they were prepared to accept men suspected of homosexual activity into the National Community provided that they gave up their so-called degeneracy and embraced their role as racially conscious "Aryan" Germans.

Legal sanctions against homosexuals were neither new nor unique to Nazi Germany. Since the establishment of the German Empire in 1871, sexual relations between men had been against the law. Paragraph 175 of the German criminal code declared "unnatural indecency" between men to be punishable by imprisonment of up to two years. The law did not define indecency or refer to sexual relationships between women. By the turn of the twentieth century, however, the nature of homosexuality and its inclusion in the criminal code had become a topic of medical, cultural, and political debate in Germany. Paragraph 175, reformers argued, was an unwarranted intrusion of the state into private relationships between consenting adults.

After Germany's defeat in World War I and the establishment of the democratic Weimar Republic, the social, cultural, and political climate of the country placed a greater emphasis

on individual rights and personal freedom. Berlin, the nation's capital and largest city, became a center of cultural and artistic experimentation. An increased openness toward the subject of human sexuality served to make homosexuals more visible, at least in some of the larger, more cosmopolitan urban areas. By the end of the 1920s, some 350,000 homosexual men and women lived in Berlin. Scores of same-sex "friendship leagues," clubs, cafés, and dance halls provided both support and community for homosexuals. New constitutional protections such as free speech permitted an increase in advocacy for homosexual rights and publications serving their community.

KARL GORATH (right) was born on December 12, 1912, in Bad Zwischenahn, Germany. His father was a sailor, and his mother was a nurse in a local hospital. At the age of 20, Karl became a deacon in his parish church.

I was 26 when my jealous lover denounced me and I was arrested at my house under Paragraph 175 of the criminal code, which defined homosexuality as an "unnatural" act. Though this law had been on the books for years, the Nazis had broadened its scope and used it as grounds to make mass arrests of homosexuals. I was imprisoned at Neuengamme concentration camp near Hamburg where the "175ers" had to wear a pink triangle.

Having been trained as a nurse, he was sent from Neuengamme to work in a prisoner hospital at Wittenburg. He refused to carry out an order to decrease the food rations of Polish prisoners of war and, as a consequence, was deported to Auschwitz as a political prisoner. He was liberated from Auschwitz in 1945. NO DATE OR PLACE GIVEN. USHMM, COURTESY OF KARL GORATH

As a direct result of the broadening of traditional notions of acceptable sexuality and the increasing liberalization of German society, a number of activists began to work for legal reform. Liberal and left-wing human rights advocates campaigned to promote the civil rights of homosexuals and to repeal Paragraph 175. Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld, the founder of the Institute for Sexual Science in Berlin, for example, was a vocal critic of Paragraph 175, arguing that homosexuality was neither an illness nor a crime but a natural variation of human sexuality. Under his leadership, the institute became a symbol of the campaign for homosexual rights and legal reform in that area.



In the years of the Weimar Republic, however, some viewed the increasing civil rights for homosexuals not as progress but as evidence that German society was deserting its traditional values. They feared a cresting wave of decadence and moral abandon and responded with growing disapproval and hostility. Conservative nationalists and radical right-wing parties capitalized on this undercurrent by blaming the homosexual community for weakening established moral values and by presenting their integration into society as proof of the decadence of the Weimar Republic. As one Nazi party deputy to parliament argued in 1927, “These homosexuals should be prosecuted with all severity, because such vices will lead to the downfall of the German nation.”

Identification pictures (mug shots) of a medical doctor (right) arrested as a homosexual under Paragraph 175 and deported to Auschwitz. He arrived in the camp on October 10, 1941, and died there on October 15, 1941. AUSCHWITZ, POLAND, OCTOBER 10, 1941. WITH PERMISSION OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU

After the Nazis took power in January 1933, they instituted a broad attack on so-called public indecency and moral degeneracy, capitalizing on long-standing disapproval of same-sex relationships to secure acceptance for their measures. Although the persecution of homosexual men had always had its roots in population policy, the Nazis primarily framed it for the public in eugenic terms, presenting homosexuality as a personal defect, a social vice, and a carrier of decadence that posed a threat to the well-being of the nation. They portrayed homosexuality as an infection that could become an epidemic, especially within all-male societies like the SA, the SS, the Hitler Youth, and the armed forces. The Nazis also linked homosexuality to subversive political behavior. This public message was illustrated in June 1934, when Hitler ordered the arrest and summary execution of known homosexual SA commander Ernest Röhm, together with 80 other high-ranking SA officers,



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as an infection that could become an epidemic.

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on the false accusation that they were part of a criminal conspiracy to overthrow the government. Although Röhm's homosexuality, which Hitler had tolerated for more than a decade, was not the reason for his murder, Himmler and others focused on Röhm's sexual preference as the basis for his actions, and they used the episode to justify further attacks against homosexuals throughout Germany.

In contrast, Nazi leaders did not generally regard lesbians as a threat to their racial policies. This attitude stemmed in part from the Nazi belief that women not only were inferior to men but also were by nature dependent on them. According to this reasoning, lesbians were not particularly threatening to the regime and thus did not merit significant police attention. Furthermore, the Nazis considered that any woman, regardless of her sexual preference, could fulfill her primary role of giving birth to as many German babies as possible. Simply by becoming a mother, every woman could serve the Nazi state. Most lesbians in Germany were, therefore, able to live relatively quiet lives and were generally undisturbed by the police.

Some exceptions existed, however. Because the police in Nazi Germany regarded lesbians as antisocial—that is, as individuals who failed to conform to the norms of the state—lesbians could be arrested or sent to concentration camps. Once there, they were assigned the black triangle reserved for asocial prisoners. Although few lesbians were imprisoned as a result of their sexuality alone, the threat of persecution made living in an open same-sex relationship dangerous. Many lesbians broke off contacts with their circles of friends, and some moved to new cities where they would be unknown. Others sought the protection of outward conformity, entering marriages of convenience with male homosexual friends. Although many lesbians experienced hardships during the Third Reich, those who remained discreet and inconspicuous or who otherwise appeared to meet social expectations were generally left alone.

The Nazi crackdown on the male homosexual community began with the closing of same-sex bars and clubs and other gathering places in early 1933. Authorities soon banned their publications and closed down organizations that advocated acceptance of same-sex relationships. On May 6, 1933, Nazi student groups and sympathizers occupied the offices of the Institute for Sexual Science in Berlin. Much of the institute's library and research archives were destroyed in the public burning of books in Berlin four days later. The Nazis denounced Magnus Hirschfeld, who was in Paris at the time and who was both homosexual and a Jew, as "the Apostle of Indecency."

Prior to 1934, criminal proceedings against homosexuals had required proof that a narrowly defined sexual act had occurred. In February 1934, however, the police stepped up the surveillance of men who might be expected to violate Paragraph 175. In October,

local law enforcement departments were ordered to submit to the Criminal Police (*Kriminalpolizei*, or *Kripo*) lists of men suspected of homosexual activity.

In June 1935, the Ministry of Justice revised Paragraph 175 as part of a massive rewriting of the criminal code. New language added as Paragraph 175a specifically imposed up to ten years of hard labor for “indecent” committed under coercion or with adolescents under the age of 21 or both, and for male prostitution. Moreover, ministry officials and court decisions expanded the category of “criminally indecent activities between men” to include any act that could be construed as sexual. The courts later decided that a violation of Paragraph 175 did not require a physical act; intent or thought alone sufficed for conviction. The result was a radical increase in prosecutions as the law prohibited virtually all interaction between men that was deemed sexual in nature.

Enforcement of Paragraph 175 fell to the Criminal Police. If a particular investigation had political ramifications (such as the investigation of a homosexual-rights activist for a left-wing party), the Gestapo might become involved. The police departments worked in tandem, occasionally conducting massive sweeps that primarily trapped victims from the working class. Less able to afford private apartments or homes, they found partners in semi-public places that put them at greater risk of discovery.

More often, however, the work of tracking down suspected homosexuals and arresting them depended on denunciations from ordinary citizens. Nazi propaganda that labeled homosexuals as “antisocial parasites” and “enemies of the state” inflamed already existing prejudices. Citizens turned in men, often on the flimsiest evidence, for as many reasons as there were accusations. Acting on the basis of those informants, the Gestapo and Criminal Police arbitrarily seized and questioned suspects, as well as possible corroborating witnesses. Those denounced were often forced to give up names of friends and acquaintances, thereby becoming informants themselves.

On October 26, 1936, Himmler formed the Reich Central Office for Combating Homosexuality and Abortion within the Security Police. The Nazis linked homosexuality to abortion because they believed that both obstructed the population growth that was so central to their ideology and goals. Indeed, for the Nazis, the termination of a pregnancy that might yield an “Aryan” German child was a crime equal to the refusal to father an “Aryan” German in the first place. After 1936, the Nazis instituted one national police registry for all sexual matters that they believed prevented the expansion of the “Aryan” race.

From early 1937 to mid-1939, the persecution of homosexual men in the court system reached its peak. Imprisonment was the most common punishment, but the length and type varied with the act involved and the individual’s prior history. For many, incarceration



meant hard labor, part of the Nazis' so-called reeducation program. All were subjected to brutal mistreatment at the hands of police, interrogators, and guards. As word spread of the arrests and the brutal conditions in German prisons, an atmosphere of fear enveloped the homosexual community.

Despite Nazi fears that homosexuality would spread through the all-male military, the German code of military conduct did not bar homosexuals from the armed forces. With the onset of World War II, homosexuals who had been persecuted and deprived of civil rights, including some who had been convicted and imprisoned, were, nevertheless, expected to fight for their country. Homosexual conduct within the German armed forces was still prosecuted under Paragraph 175, and some 7,000 soldiers were arrested and found guilty under the law. Though sentenced to prison, those who were convicted could petition to serve in a so-called punishment battalion. During the last years of the war, German military commanders often deployed those "penal" units as cannon-fodder on hopeless combat missions.

FRIEDRICH-PAUL VON GROSZHEIM (left) was born on April 27, 1906, in Lübeck, Germany. He was 11 when his father was killed in World War I. After his mother died, he and his sister, Ina, were raised by two elderly aunts. After graduating from school, Friedrich-Paul trained to be a merchant.

In January 1937, the SS arrested 230 men in Lübeck under the Nazi-revised criminal code's Paragraph 175, which outlawed homosexuality, and I was imprisoned for 10 months.... In 1938, I was rearrested, humiliated, and tortured. The Nazis finally released me, but only on the condition that I agree to be castrated. Because of the nature of my operation, I was rejected as "physically unfit" when I came up for military service in 1940. In 1943, I was arrested again, this time for being a monarchist, a supporter of the former Kaiser Wilhelm II. The Nazis imprisoned me as a political prisoner in an annex of the Neuengamme concentration camp at Lübeck.

Friedrich-Paul survived his imprisonment and settled in Hamburg after the war. NO DATE OR PLACE GIVEN. USHMM, COURTESY OF FRIEDRICH-PAUL VON GROSZHEIM

The Nazis used the war as a pretext to intensify discriminatory measures against homosexual men. In July 1940, Himmler directed officers of the Criminal Police that "in [the]

future, after their release from prison, all homosexuals who have seduced more than one partner are to be placed in preventive detention at a concentration camp.” This radical step, intended to stop the homosexual “contagion,” meant that thousands of homosexual men convicted under Paragraph 175 whose police histories recorded multiple partners faced indefinite incarceration in the camps. Furthermore, in September 1942, the Nazi Minister of Justice agreed to transfer “habitual criminals” from ministry-run prisons to the SS-run concentration camps. Those prisoners included repeat offenders of Paragraph 175. By mutual agreement between the SS and the Ministry of Justice, the prisoners were to be subject to a process explicitly called “extermination through work.”

During World War II, approximately 5,000–15,000 homosexuals were interned in SS-run concentration camps; some were required to wear a pink triangle on their prison uniforms. In addition to the extreme privations of camp existence, homosexuals in the camps were targeted in specific ways. They were often assigned to the most dangerous tasks, especially as laborers in quarries and brickyards. Attached to punishment battalions and working long hours with few breaks and often on reduced rations, many such prisoners lost their lives from exertion and from the brutality of the SS guards. Homosexual prisoners were singled out and bore especially vicious physical abuse; at the same time, they were socially shunned and sometimes abused by their fellow prisoners. They were generally isolated, occupying nearly the lowest rung in the camp prisoner hierarchy.

At the behest of German authorities, particularly the SS, physicians and scientists sought so-called medical solutions to homosexuality. Considerable disagreement existed among the professional establishment about the causes and, therefore, a recommended treatment for homosexual behavior. Some doctors considered it a genetic trait, seeking its origins within an individual’s family lineage. Others believed it to be physical, but not necessarily genetic, and looked at disorders of the central nervous system or hormone levels as possible causes. And still others saw it as a mental defect brought on by a failure of character or a negative environment. Regardless of the cause, the goal throughout all the medical research into homosexuality was to find a way to “cure” it. When that failed, outright suppression of homosexual behavior became the norm.

The avenues of so-called medical inquiry, along with the underlying beliefs that gave rise to them, resulted in a chilling array of “treatments.” The courts were anything but consistent: they convicted some individuals for acts deemed a result of uncontrollable compulsion, thereby forcibly committing the homosexuals to hospitals. They found others to be guilty as a result of diminished capacity or “weak-mindedness,” sending those men to mental institutions and, in hundreds of cases, castrating them to suppress their sex drive. Among the men committed to psychiatric clinics, some were murdered

as part of the T-4 program, which sought to rid Germany of people with physical and mental disabilities.

Homosexual concentration camp prisoners were sometimes subjected to medical experiments. For example, in late 1943, Heinrich Himmler authorized a Danish physician, SS Major Dr. Carl Vaernet, to carry out such experiments on homosexual prisoners in Buchenwald. Dr. Vaernet implanted hormone capsules in 12 male prisoners, of whom at least 10 were homosexuals. Two men died from complications of the surgery; the fates of the others are unknown.

Brutal treatment notwithstanding, the Nazi regime did not set out to kill all German homosexuals. Rather, it aimed to pressure them into changing their behavior or, if that failed, to isolate them from society and to control their supposed contagion of degeneracy. In reality, however, the Nazi state simply terrorized German homosexuals into sexual and social conformity, leaving thousands dead and shattering the lives of many more.

Using their extraordinary authority, German police arrested more than 100,000 men on suspicion of homosexual behavior. Using broad interpretations of Paragraph 175, the authorities convicted and sentenced to prison terms about 50,000 of those arrested. An unknown number of homosexual men were forced into mental hospitals or castrated rather than imprisoned. Fragmentary records indicate that at least 5,000 – 15,000 homosexual men were sent to concentration camps, a great many of whom died from starvation, disease, exhaustion, or beatings or were murdered outright.

The defeat of Nazi Germany in May 1945 brought neither reparation nor tolerance to homosexuals in Germany. The Allied Military Government of Germany, which was established in 1945 by the victorious powers to replace the central German government, repealed many decrees that had underpinned the racist and eugenic vision of the Nazis. However, the occupation authorities did not regard Paragraph 175 as a Nazi law and so left it in force after stripping it of the provisions added by the Nazis. The Allied occupation forces required some homosexuals to serve out their terms of imprisonment regardless of time spent in concentration camps. The pre-1933 version of Paragraph 175 was incorporated into the legal structure of the Federal Republic of Germany (then West Germany) and remained on the books until the decriminalization of homosexual relations between consenting adult men in 1969. The German Democratic Republic (then East Germany) reversed the law against sexual relations between men one year earlier, in 1968.

In the postwar era, German officials refused to recognize homosexuals as victims of Nazi persecution. In June 1956, West Germany declared that an individual incarcerated in a concentration camp for homosexual acts was not eligible to apply for compensation. Those homosexuals who were killed during the Nazi regime received neither commemoration

nor public acknowledgment until 1985, when, in a speech marking the 40th anniversary of the end of World War II in Europe, West German president Richard von Weizsäcker explicitly mentioned the suffering and death of homosexuals under the Nazi regime. In 1994, four years after the reunification of Germany, Paragraph 175 was formally abolished from the nation's criminal code. In May 2002, the German parliament passed legislation pardoning all homosexuals convicted under Paragraph 175 during the Nazi era.

TERRITORIAL STRUGGLE IN EUROPE:

Polish and Soviet Civilians, and Soviet Prisoners of War



WHEN HITLER LOOKED EASTWARD FROM GERMANY, HE SAW VAST TERRITORY and a wealth of resources vital to the survival of the “Aryan” German race. That land was populated mainly by Slavs (defined as Poles, Russians, Belorussians, Ukrainians), so-called Asiatics (people of Turkic, Tartar, and other Central Asian ethnic groups), and Jews—all of whom Hitler regarded as innately inferior to Germans. In his mind, it was in keeping with the natural course of history for the biologically superior “Aryan” German race to seize that land and to exploit its resources and manpower to build the German Empire.

Hitler viewed Slavs as a barbaric, uncivilized horde on the verge of winning the perennial struggle for living space in Europe. He regarded the Soviet Union as a particular threat, because he viewed it as a state run by Jews who planned to take over Europe by means of a Communist revolution. For Hitler and those who shared his obsession with racial struggle, Germany had no choice but to prepare for an aggressive war to seize the territory in the east.

From a strategic standpoint, it made sense to rebuild the nation’s strength, first taking over areas that were heavily populated by so-called ethnic Germans, meaning people who were culturally German but who lived outside the territorial boundaries of the Reich. Hitler began with two areas bordering on France: first occupying the Saarland, in 1935, after an election in accordance with the Versailles Treaty, and then occupying the Rhineland, in 1936, in violation of the treaty. Germany incorporated Austria in March 1938 and occupied the Sudetenland (part of Czechoslovakia) in October of the same year.

Throughout the 1930s, the major European powers appeased Hitler, in large part because they were not prepared for another world war. Publicly, they justified their actions by arguing that Nazi demands—though increasingly threatening—were aimed at regaining areas to which Germany had at least a demographic claim. The Munich Agreement of September 29, 1938, by which Italy, France, and Britain awarded to Nazi Germany the Sudetenland region of Czechoslovakia, was the epitome of this appeasement policy.

In March 1939, the Germans invaded and partitioned the rest of Czechoslovakia: they established a protectorate over the provinces of Bohemia and Moravia, set up Slovakia as a dependent state, and permitted Hungary to annex territory in the south and east of the country. Bohemia-Moravia had not been a historical part of Germany nor was it home to large numbers of ethnic Germans. Because the invasion was a direct violation of the Munich Agreement, Britain and France realized that Hitler’s plans were far more sinister than they had at first appeared. Those countries resolved to go to war if Nazi Germany attacked another eastern European nation. Correctly predicting the identity of Hitler’s next target, the Western powers offered a territorial guarantee to Poland within weeks of the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia.

In August 1939, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union stunned the world by signing a nonaggression agreement (the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact) which, in a secret addendum, called for the partition of Poland and the division of the Baltic region (including Estonia, Finland, Latvia, and Lithuania) and the eastern Balkans (Romania and Bulgaria) into respective spheres of influence. The agreement, surprising in view of Hitler's loathing for Soviet Russia, was a tactical maneuver that gave Germany the opportunity to attack and occupy much of Poland without fearing a two-front war. Furthermore, the pact called for the repatriation and settling of ethnic Germans in the new areas of the Reich, while at the same time expelling Poles from those same territories. This strategy was part and parcel of Nazi efforts to create German settlements throughout the occupied eastern territories.

THE GERMAN INVASION OF POLAND

Assured of Soviet neutrality, Hitler ordered the invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939, catapulting Europe into war. Although Polish troops fought hard against vastly better equipped German forces, the contest was not equal. After defending Warsaw fiercely and running out of food, water, and space into which to retreat, the surviving Polish units surrendered on September 27. Fighting ended in early October.

Germany directly annexed most of western Poland, where large numbers of ethnic Germans lived. The Germans formed the central and southern regions of the dismembered Polish state into a political entity called the General Government with Nazi party veteran and administrator Hans Frank as the top civilian authority.

The Soviet Union annexed the eastern provinces of Poland and, in 1940, drawing on further agreement with the Germans, incorporated all three Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) and the two eastern provinces of Romania: Bukovina and Bessarabia.

German forces hold Polish civilians (right) at gunpoint during the invasion of Poland, September 1939.

POLAND, SEPTEMBER 1939. USHMM, COURTESY OF DOKUMENTATIONSARCHIV DES ÖSTERREICHISCHEN WIDERSTANDES

For Hitler and those who shared
his obsession with racial struggle,
Germany had no choice
but to prepare for an aggressive war
to seize the territory in the east.



This partition of Poland was a prelude to a massive reengineering of the population in the areas that the Germans controlled. Like Austria, the Sudetenland, and the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, the Nazis regarded most of western Poland as an extension of Germany itself. Thus, their goal for this area was complete “Germanization,” thereby assimilating the new provinces politically, culturally, socially, and economically into the Reich. Above all, they envisioned a strictly German population. SS leader Heinrich Himler described the aim explicitly in the foreword to the June/July 1942 issues of the magazine *Deutsche Arbeit*, “It is not our task to Germanize in the old sense, that is, to teach the people there the German language and German law, but to see to it that only people of purely German, Germanic blood live in the East.”

In contrast, the Nazis conceived of the General Government as a giant reservation for the Polish civilian population, who were to be suppressed, enslaved, and exploited for the benefit of the Germans. Kraków became the capital city because the Germans planned to turn Warsaw into a backwater town. In a top secret memorandum of May 1940 titled The “Treatment of Racial Aliens in the East,” Himmler outlined the sinister plans for this part of Poland:

After a systematic implementation of these measures in the course of the next ten years, the population of the General Government will inevitably consist of a remaining inferior population, supplemented by those deported from the eastern provinces [the Polish territories annexed to Germany] and from all parts of the German Reich, who have the same racial and human characteristics.... This population will be at our disposal as leaderless laborers, and will furnish Germany annually with migrant workers and labor for special tasks (roads, quarries, construction of buildings).

The Germans wasted no time implementing their plans. Beginning in October 1939, SS and police units began to expel Poles and Jews from the German-occupied parts of Poland to the General Government. By March 1941, German authorities had evicted 465,000 people (365,000 Poles and 100,000 Jews) without warning and had plundered their property and belongings. Many elderly people and children died en route or in make-shift transit camps. The SS and police had to halt the deportations in March 1941 because the trains they were using were needed to transport soldiers and supplies to the front in preparation for the German invasion of the Soviet Union and because Governor General Frank refused to accept any more deportees.

Meanwhile, as planned, the German authorities in collaboration with Soviet leaders relocated ethnic Germans who had resided in the Baltic states, Bukovina, and Bessarabia into the homes and farms of the ousted Poles and Jews. The aim, as always, was to allow for the growth of the German population while simultaneously banishing, enslaving, or eliminating altogether so-called racial enemies and inferiors.

In addition to shifting the population in ways that suited the ideological goals of the Nazi regime, the leadership set out to dominate and exploit the Polish civilian population. To eliminate any potential for organized resistance, the Germans targeted Poland's middle and upper classes for annihilation: the intelligentsia, educated professionals, entrepreneurs, landowners, clergy, and activists in nationalist organizations. Behind the invading German troops, the SS and police deployed special action units called Mobile Killing Squads (*Einsatzgruppen*), who arrested or killed outright civilians who resisted the Germans or who were considered capable of doing so because of their position and social status.

When necessary, the SS could count on active support from units of the German army. Tens of thousands of wealthy landowners, clergymen, and members of the intelligentsia—government officials, teachers, doctors, dentists, officers, journalists, and others (both Poles and Jews)—were either shot en masse or sent to prisons and concentration camps. Army units and so-called self-defense forces composed of ethnic Germans also killed thousands of civilians. In many instances, the Germans perpetrated those murders as reprisal actions for the killing of individual Germans, for which entire communities were held responsible.

During the summer of 1940, SS and police units initiated a new roundup aimed at members of the Polish intelligentsia in the General Government. Within the framework of the euphemistically named Extraordinary Pacification Operation, they shot several thousand university professors, teachers, priests, and others. In Warsaw, the Germans perpetrated those murders in the Pawiak prison, outside the city in the Kampinos Forest near Palmiry, and in other locations.

The German conquerors targeted representatives of the Roman Catholic Church because it was a symbol of Polish nationalism (as a result of its association with the movement to reestablish the Polish state during the nineteenth century). Between 1939 and 1945, the Germans killed an estimated 3,000 members of the Polish clergy in the General Government. In those areas of Poland annexed to Germany, the Germans systematically closed houses of worship and deported, imprisoned, or killed hundreds of priests. They also shut down seminaries and convents as they persecuted monks and nuns.

The Nazis also sought to destroy Polish culture in order to keep the masses uneducated, ignorant, and, therefore, paralyzed. The Germans closed or destroyed universities,

schools, museums, libraries, and scientific laboratories. They demolished hundreds of monuments to Polish national heroes. German officials decreed that the education of Polish children must end after a few years of elementary school. Himmler put the policy succinctly in his May 1940 memorandum:

For the non-German population of the East, there cannot be schooling beyond the fourth grade of elementary school. The sole goal of this basic schooling is: simple arithmetic to the number 500 at most; writing one's name; and the doctrine that it is divine commandment to obey the Germans.... I do not consider reading to be necessary.

Those policies dovetailed with the German occupiers' view that the Poles were valuable only as a reservoir of inexpensive manual labor. The Nazis exploited Poland's peasants and industrial workers as unskilled laborers, uprooting them from their homes and sending them—almost always against their will—to farms, factories, and labor camps throughout the Reich. There they worked for little or no wage, were subjected to humiliating measures to maintain racial segregation, and were punished brutally for perceived violations of labor discipline or fraternization with the “Aryan” German population.

In the General Government, in conjunction with an effort to “Germanize” Zamość province in 1942–43, the SS and police rounded up 110,000 Poles from 300 villages in this region. Families were torn apart when teens and adults were taken for forced labor and when elderly, young, and disabled people were moved to other localities. Tens of thousands of Poles were incarcerated in the Auschwitz and Majdanek concentration camps. Over the course of the war, the Germans deported more than a million and a half Poles, many of whom were teenagers, to work as forced laborers in the Reich.

Although Germany also used forced laborers from western Europe, the authorities imposed especially harsh discriminatory measures on Poles and, later, on civilians deported from the occupied Soviet Union. Regulations required Poles to wear identifying purple P sewn to their clothing and to observe a curfew; those laws forbade them the use of public transportation. Although enforcement depended on the resolve of the individual employer, Polish laborers as a rule were compelled to work longer hours for lower wages than west Europeans, and in many cities they lived in segregated barracks behind barbed wire. Social interaction with Germans outside work was strictly forbidden, and sexual relations with them constituted a crime that was punishable by death. During the war, German authorities executed hundreds of Polish men for actual and alleged sexual affairs with German women.

Poles were prisoners in nearly every concentration camp throughout German-occupied Poland and the Reich. Until 1942, Poles made up the overwhelming majority of prisoners at Auschwitz concentration camp. Whereas German political prisoners were incarcerated as punishment for nonconformity and could sometimes regain their freedom, Poles had no such status or power with which to bargain. They were rounded up, summarily imprisoned, and put to work. Unlike policy toward other “racial” enemies, such as Jews and Roma (Gypsies), the Nazis did not intend to systematically annihilate the entire Polish population, though they did seek to eliminate the leadership classes. Rather, they planned to use the Poles as a labor force and to allow the natural course of time and events—helped along by meager food rations and abysmal living conditions—to result in their gradual but inevitable demise as an independent people carrying a national culture. Malnutrition, exhaustion, and mistreatment led to an extremely high rate of death by attrition, in turn making more room for Germans to populate the region.

German authorities also executed thousands of Poles who had been “convicted” of minor offenses or violations of labor discipline; in concentration camps and some medical institutes, those authorities subjected Poles to cruel and lethal medical experiments.

In addition to German suppression of potential resisters and exploitation of the rest of the population, a cornerstone of German policy in the east was to seek and win new blood for the “Aryan” race. Himmler described it as follows in a May 1940 top secret memo on the treatment of racial aliens in the east:

Obviously in such a mixture of peoples, there will always be some racially good types. Therefore, I think that it is our duty to take their children with us, to remove them from their environment, if necessary by robbing, or stealing them. Either we win over any good blood that we can use for ourselves and give it a place in our people, or ... we destroy that blood.

According to Nazi thinking, adults could not be adopted into the race (even if they had the requisite Nordic “Aryan” blood) because they had been hopelessly Slavicized by their extended immersion in Polish culture and language. Their children, in contrast, were young, impressionable, and easily molded: to the Nazis, those Polish children represented the potential for new members of the “Master Race.”

In the service of this program, Himmler planned “an annual screening of all children, ages 6 to 10, in the General Government to separate racially valuable and nonvaluable juveniles.” The SS seized thousands of Polish children and considered them for possible



adoption by German parents. “If a child is recognized to be of our blood,” Himmler went on, “the parents will be notified that the child will be sent to school in Germany and will remain permanently in Germany...” As promised, children who were deemed “valuable” by the Nazis were promptly taken from their parents and homes, assigned German names, forbidden to speak Polish, and sent away to be reeducated in SS or other Nazi institutions. Some of them ultimately died of hunger or disease, and few of the children who survived ever saw their parents again.

A group of Polish babies, (left) considered by the Nazis to be racially valuable because of their “German Aryan” features. They were forcibly taken from their mothers to be adopted into ethnic German families. POLAND, 1941–43. USHMM, COURTESY OF LYDIA CHAGOLL

Many more children were taken from home but ultimately rejected as unsuitable for Germanization after failing to measure up to the criteria established by SS “race experts.” Those unfortunate castaways were not returned to their parents but were sent to children’s homes or killed, some of them by phenol injection at Auschwitz. The Germans kidnapped an estimated 50,000 children, the majority of whom were taken from orphanages and foster homes in the annexed lands. They also abducted and Germanized infants born to Polish women working at forced labor on farms and in factories in the Reich. In contrast, if an examination of an expectant mother and the father of her unborn baby suggested that a “nonvaluable” child would result from the union, the German authorities generally forced the mother to undergo an abortion.

Within months of the Polish surrender in 1939, former soldiers and second-rank nationalist leaders, many of whom were unknown to the Germans, formed an active resistance movement whose ranks were swelled by the brutality of the occupation. Despite German efforts to quell organized opposition, the Polish resistance was one of the largest in occupied Europe: it was a virtual underground state apparatus, with more than 300 political and military groups working to subvert and sabotage the Germans. In the face of military defeat, the Polish government refused to surrender, establishing a government-in-exile in London in 1940.

Inside Poland itself, resistance groups established courts for trying collaborators and others, and they organized clandestine schools in response to the closing of educational institutions. In addition, the universities of Warsaw, Kraków, and Lwów (present-day L'viv, Ukraine) all operated underground. In December 1942, members of the Polish resistance in Warsaw formed Żegota, an organization that provided refuge, money, forged papers, and other means of support to Polish Jews. During the war, Żegota saved about 3,000 Jewish people, many of them children.

JULIAN NOGA (right) in his camp uniform, with the identifying prisoner patch bearing a P for Pole on the upper right of his jacket at Flossenbürg concentration camp. Julian was born to a Polish Catholic family in Skrzynka, Poland, on July 31, 1921. During the German occupation, Julian hid a rifle belonging to a Polish soldier but was betrayed and sent for forced labor as a farmhand for a wealthy Austrian family. He fell in love with their second-youngest daughter, Frieda, but Reich law strictly forbade romance between Germans and Poles. Julian persisted in seeing Frieda, despite repeated warnings; in September 1941, the German police arrested him and deported him to Flossenbürg concentration camp, where he was deployed at forced labor in the stone quarry.

There [were] just so many, so many bad things happening in Flossenbürg. The life, daily life was terrible. You get up 4:30 ... quick, quick, quick, quick, and go to the quarry, work twelve hours, six days a week, twelve hours a day. Sunday ... Sunday before noon we do the chores, so-called, you know. Clean out your lockers, clean out the barrack, clean up yourselves, and everything. Then we had inspection, you know. If you had [a] button missing or something like that, you [were] punished for that.

Julian was liberated on April 23, 1945, while on a forced march from Flossenbürg. Frieda also survived, having spent two years in Ravensbrück concentration camp. The two were reunited, and they married in 1946 and emigrated to the United States.

FLOSSENBÜRG, GERMANY; AUGUST 1942–APRIL 1945. USHMM, COURTESY OF JULIAN AND FRIEDA NOGA

The Polish military also continued to fight on after the country was occupied. Officers of the regular Polish armed forces headed the underground Home Army (*Armia Krajowa*), in which they trained recruits, stockpiled weapons, and engaged in partisan operations. In



addition, the smaller Polish Communist movement organized the People's Army (*Armia Ludowa*), which also conducted partisan strikes. After the massive expulsions from the General Government in late 1942 and 1943, both Communist and non-Communist members of Polish partisan units—whose ranks were filled with terrorized peasants—attacked ethnic German settlers. The price was a heavy one, because the Germans carried out reprisals in the form of mass killings of Polish civilians. Throughout the occupation, the Germans applied a ruthless retaliation policy, destroying dozens of villages and killing men, women, and children. In the cities, public hangings and shootings were an almost daily occurrence as the Germans sought to deter Poles from engaging in further resistance.

As Soviet troops reached the east bank of the Vistula River opposite Warsaw on August 1, 1944, the Home Army launched an uprising in the capital city. After 63 days of bitter fighting (with little aid from the Soviet army), the leaders of the insurrection were forced to surrender to the Germans. Although they treated the leaders of the uprising as prisoners of war, the Germans killed or deported thousands of civilians. Acting on Hitler's orders, German forces reduced Warsaw to rubble.

Reliable statistics for the total number of Poles who died as a result of German policies do not exist; documentation on this subject is fragmentary. Most scholars estimate that close to two million non-Jewish Polish civilians lost their lives as a direct result of German occupation policies and military or antipartisan operations. Among them were Poles who were murdered in executions or who died as a result of being incarcerated in prisons, becoming part of forced labor, and being placed in concentration camps. Still others lost their lives in military battles, including an estimated 50,000 civilians killed during the German conquest of Poland in 1939; 225,000 civilians killed during the 1944 Home Army uprising in Warsaw; and an undetermined number killed in 1944–45 during the Soviet military campaign that drove the Germans out of Poland. It is important to mention, too, that the figure of nearly two million civilians does not include Poles who were victims of the 1939–41 Soviet occupation of eastern Poland and of deportations to Central Asia and Siberia. Records on that subject are incomplete, and the Soviet control of Poland for 50 years after the war has impeded independent scholarship in this area.

THE GERMAN ATTACK ON THE SOVIET UNION

On June 22, 1941, Germany launched Operation Barbarossa, an attack on the Soviet Union that violated the nonaggression pact the two countries had signed less than two years before. Within weeks, German divisions swept through the eastern part of Poland and conquered Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. In September, the Germans laid siege to Leningrad; by the end of October, they had captured Minsk, Smolensk, Kiev, Odesa (Odessa),

and Kharkov (present-day Kharkiv). After pacifying most of the Crimean peninsula, the Germans had besieged Sevastopol. Millions of Soviet soldiers were encircled, cut off from supplies and reinforcements, and forced to surrender.

For Nazi Germany, this attack was not an ordinary military operation; it was the next step in the Nazi plan to destroy Soviet Russia (and the Jewish-Communist threat Nazis believed it contained) and to colonize eastern Europe for the expansion of the “Aryan” German race. It was the long-awaited final battle between German national socialism and Soviet communism—the decisive racial war between the Nordic peoples, led by the “Aryan” Germans, on the one hand, and the Slavs and Jews on the other hand. General Erich Hoepner, the commander of the 4th Panzer Army, outlined clearly the fundamental principles of the Nazi crusade in a memorandum dated May 1941. “The war against Russia is the inevitable result of a struggle for existence that has been forced upon us,” he wrote.

It is the old fight of Germanic peoples against the Slavic peoples, the defense of European culture against the Muscovite-Asiatic flood, and the defense against Jewish Bolshevism. This war must have as its goal the destruction of today's Russia and must therefore be waged with unprecedented harshness. In conception and execution, every battle must be guided by the iron will to completely and mercilessly annihilate the enemy. In particular, the sponsors of the current Russian-Bolshevik system are not to be spared.

The Nazis approached the Soviet civilian population in much the same way as they had regarded the Poles nearly two years earlier. Their ideological position regarding both groups was fundamentally the same: Slavs were seen as *Untermenschen*, which roughly translates as “subhumans.” In keeping with the Nazis’ hierarchical view of racial groups, they regarded the Slavs as nothing more than useless bodies occupying land and resources that rightly belonged to the “Aryan” German race. As such, Soviet state and Communist Party officials were to be killed to prevent resistance and to stop the spread of what the Nazis considered to be “Jewish” Bolshevism.

Insofar as possible, the Germans would exploit the masses for labor; otherwise the Germans would eliminate them to make room for German settlement or expel them farther eastward, denying them essential food and shelter to survive the Russian winters. In bringing those plans to partial fruition, the Germans killed or directly caused the death of millions of Soviet civilians, deported millions more for forced labor in Germany, and enslaved still more millions in the occupied Soviet Union.

One of Germany's major war aims in the Soviet Union was the ruthless plunder of economic resources, especially agricultural produce. Hitler remembered the food shortages in Germany at the end of World War I and the resulting riots in Berlin, and he blamed them for the collapse of domestic morale. Along with other right-wing politicians, he saw a direct link between those events and Germany's eventual capitulation. In fighting *his* war, Hitler was determined to maintain civilian confidence, averting any internal crises that could lead to a repeat of those events in 1918. German planners were well aware that the spoliation of Soviet resources would inevitably result in drastic food shortages for the native population—in fact, they counted on it. In their determination to keep the German population well fed at home, Nazi leaders calculated and accepted that—as a result of this policy—as many as 30 million Soviet civilians would die of starvation.

As in Poland, the Germans crushed any show of opposition by the Soviets without mercy. Hitler's directive for the attack on the Soviet Union was specific on this point: he called on his troops to react to any type of resistance by shooting. In retaliation for partisan attacks, German forces burned whole villages and shot the rural populations of entire districts. At the same time, German military authorities made it clear that crimes committed by their soldiers were not to be punished if they were ideologically motivated. This policy was an open invitation for soldiers to behave brutally toward civilians, and it gave them not only the license but also the obligation to terrorize the population to secure the occupation and to guarantee the long-term German future.

The deeply ideological nature of the Germans' fight against the Soviet Union was reflected in the "Commissar Order" issued by the German Armed Forces High Command on June 6, 1941. Political commissars were Soviet Communist Party officials who oversaw its military units and reported directly to party leaders. Operating as they did outside the military hierarchy, commissars acted as a conduit from the party to the ranks of ordinary soldiers, transmitting political propaganda and preventing dissension. To the Germans, they represented the true "pillars of opposition," the link between the Bolshevik ideologies and the minions in the military who the Nazis believed fought blindly on Bolshevism's behalf. For that reason, German soldiers were ordered to shoot any political commissars who were taken prisoner.

The Commissar Order read: "The originators of barbaric, Asiatic methods of warfare are the political commissars.... Therefore, when captured either in battle or offering resistance, they are to be shot on principle." During the initial attack on the Soviet Union throughout the summer and autumn of 1941, the German armed forces generally complied with this order. In May 1942, however, the Commissar Order was rescinded at the urging of German field commanders, who came up against much stronger resistance when the routine shooting of the commissars became known to Soviet soldiers.

Just as the Nazis targeted political commissars as agents of the Soviet Communist Party, they regarded Soviet prisoners of war (POWs) as an integral part of the so-called Bolshevik menace. The Germans killed POWs in massive numbers, not as a result of military operations but as a part of Nazi racial policy. Indeed, the German treatment of Soviet POWs differed significantly from policy toward POWs from Britain and the United States, countries the Nazis regarded as racial equals of the Germans. Of the 231,000 British and American prisoners held by the Germans during the war, about 8,300 died in German custody. Even Polish POWs fared better; provided they were neither Jewish nor leaders of nationalist organizations, they were generally released.

The treatment of Soviet POWs by the Germans violated every standard of warfare. The Nazi regime claimed that it was under no obligation to provide for their humane care because the Soviet Union had neither ratified the 1929 Geneva Convention on Prisoners of War, nor specifically declared its commitment to the 1907 Hague Convention on the Rules of War. Technically, both nations, therefore, were bound only by the general international standard of waging war as it had developed in modern times. Yet even by that measure, prisoners of war were guaranteed certain protections. With the Soviets, however, the Nazis dropped those as well.

From the outset in August 1941, the Germans implemented a policy of mass starvation, setting a ration of just 2,200 calories per day for captured Soviet soldiers deployed at forced labor. This amount was not enough to sustain life for long, but the reality proved even worse because prisoners typically received much less than the official ration. Many prisoners received at most a ration of 700 calories a day. They were often provided as food, for example, only special “Russian” bread made from sugar beet husks and straw flour. Within a short period of time, the result of this “subsistence” ration, as the German army termed it, was death by starvation. Numerous accounts from the late summer and fall of 1941 report that the desperate POWs, suffering from malnutrition and wild with hunger, tried to ease their craving for food by eating grass and leaves.

The prisoners’ suffering from starvation was compounded by a lack of decent shelter and clothing. In the makeshift camps established by the Germans, many prisoners had to dig holes in the ground to improvise shelter from the elements. In October 1941 alone, almost 5,000 Soviet soldiers died each day; by the end of the year, the prisoner population was ravaged by epidemics of typhoid and dysentery. The onset of winter accelerated the mass death because so many victims had little or no protection from the cold. POWs held in camps in the General Government were left to linger for months in trenches, dugouts, or sod houses; in occupied Belorussia (present-day Belarus), the Germans provided only pavilions (structures with roofs but no walls) to house them. Throughout the unusually



cold winter of 1941–42, starvation and disease resulted in death of staggering proportions. Between the summer of 1941 and February 1942, more than two million Soviet soldiers died as victims of the Nazi racial policy.

A column of Soviet prisoners of war under German guard (left) marches to an internment camp. KHARKOV, [UKRAINE] USSR, CIRCA 1941. USHMM, COURTESY OF NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION

Many captured Soviet soldiers—especially the wounded—were scheduled to arrive at transit camps and collection centers, but instead died on the way as a result of gross neglect and inadequate provisions. Most of the prisoners caught in 1941 had to march west behind the German lines across hundreds of miles; those who were too exhausted to continue were shot where they collapsed. When the Armed Forces High Command permitted POWs to be transported by train, it provided only open freight cars and allowed days to go by without any distribution of rations. According to army reports, between 25 percent and 70 percent of the prisoners on those transports died en route to POW camps in Germany and the General Government.

The Germans not only allowed POWs to die as a result of deliberate neglect, but also shot them outright in some cases, especially those who had been wounded, because their deaths freed the German army of their care. At the urging of the German leadership, military personnel issued a directive on September 8, 1941, urging “energetic and ruthless action ... to wipe out any trace of resistance” from prisoners. Thus, they should shoot without warning any who attempted to escape. Moreover, a decree issued on September 8, 1941, stated that the use of arms against Soviet POWs was, “as a rule, to be regarded as legal,” thereby providing a clear invitation for German soldiers to kill Soviet POWs with impunity.

In cooperation with the SS-led Security Police and Security Service (SD), the German army also engaged in more direct, systematic, and selective killing of groups of Soviet soldiers in the POW camps. In mid-July 1941, just weeks after the German invasion, General Hermann Reinecke, the officer in charge of prisoner-of-war affairs in the Armed Forces High Command, ordered that all Soviet POWs be screened for “politically and racially intolerable elements.”

After determining through interrogation those who were “important” state and Soviet Communist Party members, intellectuals, devoted Communists, and Jews, the German camp authorities transferred those prisoners to the custody of the Security Police and SD. Once in the hands of the SS, such prisoners were shot. The SS did not carry out the killings in the POW camps or the immediate vicinity, but rather in a secure area such as a concentration camp. As many as 500,000 Soviet soldiers were shot by the Security Police and the SD by 1942. Even after the direct killing operations ceased, Soviet POWs who had been transferred to concentration camps continued to suffer under extreme and brutal oppression; the SS murdered more than 55,000 Soviet POWs in various concentration camps.

Emaciated and half-dressed outside in the winter of 1942, Soviet prisoners of war (right) stand for a picture in the Mauthausen concentration camp. MAUTHAUSEN, AUSTRIA, JANUARY 1942. USHMM, COURTESY OF DOKUMENTATIONSARCHIV DES OESTERREICHISCHEN WIDERSTANDES

In September 1941, Rudolf Höss, commandant of the Auschwitz concentration camp, conducted the first experiments of mass murder by gassing, using Zyklon B, or hydrogen cyanide, in a gas chamber constructed in Auschwitz specifically for that purpose. Höss used 600 Soviet POWs and 250 Polish civilians as victims. Beginning in the autumn of 1939, the Germans had been using carbon monoxide gas as a killing agent on people whom they considered to be disabled and who were institutionalized in Germany and Austria (see chapter 4). In those operations, the Germans found that they could kill large numbers of people in an assembly-line fashion with minimal effort and personnel. Ultimately, they would apply this technique to murder millions of European Jews.

The killing of Soviet POWs would likely have continued had the fortunes of war not changed in the winter of 1941–42. Hitler and his military planners, victims of their own ethnic and racial stereotypes, had expected a quick campaign against the Soviet Union. They viewed Slavs as dull and incompetent and believed that the Soviet Union was in the



The treatment of Soviet prisoners of war by the Nazis

violated every standard of warfare.

grip of Jews, whom they regarded as cowardly and perfidious. As a result, the Germans severely miscalculated the strength and conviction of their military opponents and failed to prepare for a protracted campaign, part of which would be fought during the brutal Russian winter. The impressive initial successes of the German army only added to the German's sense of overconfidence. But as the invasion slowed and the army grew exhausted from months of campaigning, the German forces found themselves overextended, because they lacked winter clothing and equipment and had outrun their desperately needed supply lines. The Soviets began to resist more bitterly than expected, and they proved to be far better equipped than the Germans for the cold weather.

In December 1941, the Soviet Union launched a major counterattack, driving the Germans back from Moscow in chaos. Only after several weeks and tremendous losses in soldiers and equipment were the Germans able to stabilize the front east of Smolensk. Nevertheless, Hitler and the German leadership understood that the war would last much longer than anticipated. The economic requirements of a longer war and the critical labor shortage in the German economy created a desperate need for labor. In that context, the Nazi leadership realized that using Soviet POWs as laborers for the war effort was more practical than killing them. Beginning in 1942, therefore, Hitler authorized better treatment and slightly increased rations for Soviet POWs so they would have the strength to work. Although the enormous death rate among the Soviet POWs declined, it nevertheless remained higher than that among other groups of POWs. In 1943 and 1944, however, the death rates soared again as a result of starvation and disease. In total over the course of the war, the German army captured more than five and a half million Soviet POWs. Of those, more than three million died or were killed in German custody.

After the war, the ordeal of Soviet POWs who survived German captivity did not end. Soviet authorities, often without justification, tended to view returning POWs as collaborators or even traitors, because they had "allowed" themselves to be captured. After their repatriation, most POWs underwent a debriefing in which they had to justify the circumstances under which they had been caught. Some who had been liberated by British or U.S. forces had to convince the Soviet authorities that they were not Western intelligence agents. Others faced prolonged interrogation, arrest, and trial in Soviet courts. Thousands were convicted of collaboration or treason and were either executed or sentenced to confinement in a forced labor camp. Most of those who were imprisoned remained so until the death of Josef Stalin in 1953.