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JUDAISM

History, Belief and Practice

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CHAPTER 49

The Nazi Regime

Timeline:

1933 Hitler appointed Chancellor. Nazi boycott of Jewish businesses

1935 Nuremberg Laws

1938 Kristallnacht

1939 Invasion of Poland

1940 Ghettos established in eastern Europe

1941 Invasion of Russia

1942 Wannsee Conference

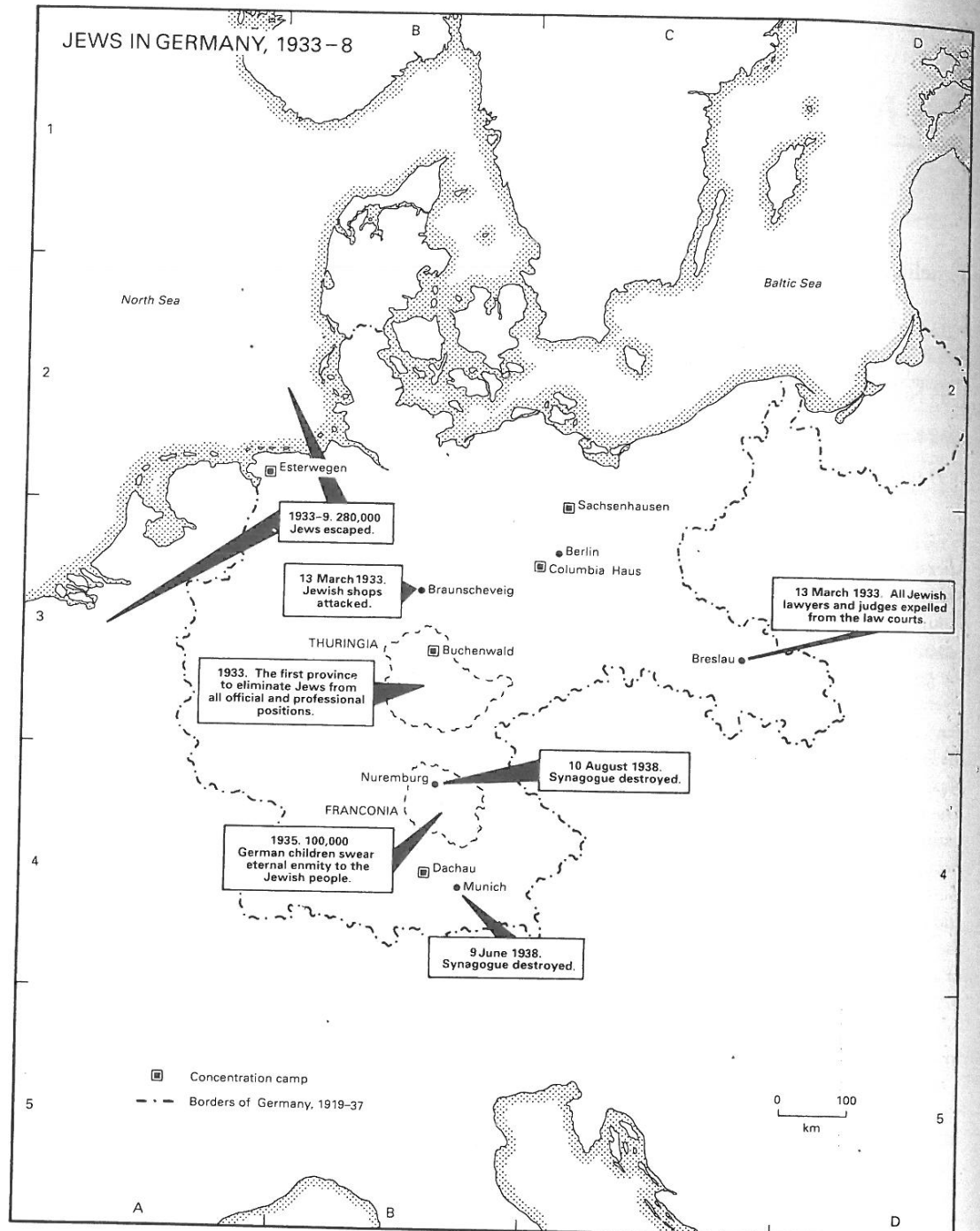
1942–1944 Extermination camps established

After the First World War Germany flourished as a federal republic, but the depression of 1930–32 brought about massive unemployment. As a consequence extremist parties gained considerable support forcing the government to rule by presidential decree. After several unsuccessful conservative coalitions, the president, Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg, appointed the leader of the National Socialist Workers' Party (the Nazi Party), **Adolf Hitler** (1889–1945) as chancellor. The ideology of the Nazi party was based on German nationalism, anti-capitalism and anti-Semitism. According to Hitler, the Jews were responsible for Germany's defeat in the war as well as the economic and cultural decline of the post-war period. In addition the Bolshevik victory in Russia was portrayed as part of a Jewish plot for world domination. To combat the plans of international Jewry, Hitler believed it was necessary for Germany to gain control over a vast empire in which Aryan supremacy could be ensured.

Once the Nazis gained control of the government, they pursued these racist objectives by curtailing civil liberties. In 1933 all political parties were eliminated; strikes were forbidden; and trade unions were dissolved. The arrest of dissident scholars and scientists was followed by a purge of the party's radicals. During the next few years Jews were eliminated from the civil service, the legal and medical professions, and cultural

and educational institutions. In September 1935 the Nuremberg Laws made Jews into second-class inhabitants, and all marriage and sexual liaisons were described as crimes against the state. In 1938 Jewish communal bodies were put under the control of the Gestapo, and Jews were forced to register their property. Later in the year the Nazi party organized an onslaught against the Jewish population in which Jews were murdered and Jewish property was destroyed. This event, known as **Kristallnacht**, was a prelude to the Holocaust which brought about a new stage of modern Jewish history.

With the first phase of war, pressure on Jews in Germany increased. From September 1939 Jews had to be off the streets by 8.00 p.m.; their movements were restricted; they were banned from various types of transport and deprived of the use of the telephone. From December 1939 Jewish rations were cut and Jews were restricted to specific shopping hours. The Nazis' plan for the elimination of the Jews proceeded in stages. Initially thousands of Jews were deported or put into forced labour camps which frequently led to their death. But in 1941 when the invasion of Russia was imminent, rumours began to circulate that Hitler had entrusted Reinhard Heydrich with the preparation of a Final Solution to the Jewish problem. On 30 July 1940 Hermann Göring, who was in charge of the



Map 63 Jews in Germany, 1933-1938

German economy, had ordered Reinhard Heydrich to take all preparatory measures required for the final solution of the Jewish question in the European territories under German influence. Heydrich himself revealed the Final Solution to staff members at the Wannsee conference on 20 January 1942 in the office of the International Criminal Police Commission outside Berlin. The war with Russia, he explained, made the plan of deporting all Jews an impossibility. The only alternative was extermination.

The first stage of the Nazis' plan for European Jewry had already begun with the invasion of Poland. In September 1939 Hitler decided to incorporate much of Poland into Germany, and move more than 600,000 Jews into a central area ('General Government'). When the Jewish population was ghettoized into what Hitler referred to as a huge Polish labour camp, a massive work programme was initiated. Here Jews worked all day, seven days a week, dressed in rags and fed on bread, soup and potatoes. This slave-labour operation was a form of murder; the phrase 'destruction through work' was used repeatedly in discussions between Georg Thierack, Joseph Goebbels, and Heinrich Himmler in September 1942.

According to Rudolf Hess, the commandant at Auschwitz, by the end of 1944 about 400,000 slaves worked in the German armaments industry. These workers had no names, only numbers tattooed on their bodies; if one died a replacement was sought without

any inquest into the cause of death. Yet working Jews to their graves was not sufficient for the Nazi regime; what was needed was a plan of mass extermination which began with the **invasion of Russia** in 1941. This was designed to destroy the centre of what was described by the Nazis as the 'Jewish-Bolshevik conspiracy'.

At first mobile killing battalions of 500–900 men (the *Einsatzgruppen*) under the supervision of Heydrich began the slaughter of Russian Jewry. Of the 4,500,000 Jews who resided in Soviet territory, more than half fled before the German invasion; those who remained were concentrated in large cities making it easier for Heydrich's troops to carry out their task. Throughout the country the *Einsatzgruppen* moved into Russian towns, sought out the rabbi or Jewish council and obtained a list of all Jewish inhabitants. The Jews were then rounded up in market places, crowded into trains, buses and trucks and taken to the woods where mass graves had been dug. They were then machine-gunned to death. In this slaughter some Jews attempted to escape the onslaught by hiding under floorboards and cellars, but they were buried alive or blasted out with grenades. A few girls offered themselves to stay alive; they were used during the night but killed the next morning. In the initial sweep between October and December 1941, these troops killed over 300,000 Jews; in a second stage that lasted throughout 1942 over 900,000 were murdered.

SOURCES

Hitler and the Jews

In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler described his growing awareness of Jewry once he lived in Vienna:

Once, as I was strolling through the inner city, I suddenly encountered an apparition in a black caftan and black hair locks. Is this a Jew? was my first thought. For, to be sure, they had not looked like that in Linz. I observed this man furtively and cautiously, but the longer I stared at this foreign face, scrutinizing feature for feature, the more my first question assumed a new form: Is this a German?

(Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, in UH, p. 29)

For Hitler the Jew could never become a German because he was racially and religiously distinct. The difference between Jews and Germans was so vast as to make them inherently aliens. Jews, he asserted, were:

not Germans of a special religion, but a people in themselves; for since I had begun to concern myself with this question and to take cognizance of the Jews, Vienna appeared to me in a different light than before. Wherever I went, I began to see Jews, and the more I saw, the more sharply they became distinguished in my eyes from the rest of humanity.

(Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, in UH, p. 30)

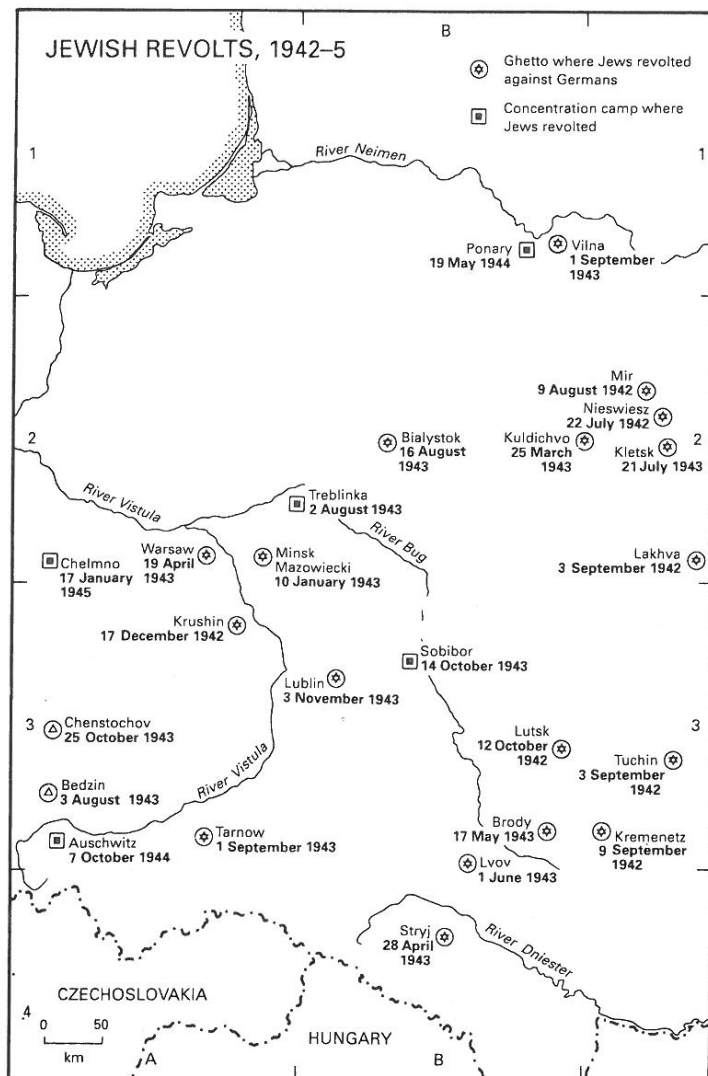
Comparing Jews with vermin, he wrote:

'Was there any form of filth or profligacy, particularly in cultural life, without at least one Jew involved in it? If you cut even cautiously into such an abscess you found, like a maggot in a rotting body, often dazzled by the sudden light – a kike!

(Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, in UH, p. 30)



Figure 49 Anti-semitic cartoon from a German schoolbook. Copyright Imperial War Museum, London.



Map 65 Jewish revolts, 1942-1945

The SS

In the creation of the Third Reich, the SS played an increasingly important role. Eventually it became a party police force, a regular army within the army. Infiltrating every aspect of German life, it spread its tentacles throughout the nation. The principles of selection to the SS embodied the values espoused by the Nazi regime, as Heinrich Himmler explained in a speech delivered in 1935:

The first principle for us was and is the recognition of the values of blood and selection . . . We went about it like a seedsman who, wanting to improve the strain of a good old

variety which has become crossbred and lost its vigour, goes through the fields to pick up the best plants . . . The nature of the selection process was to concentrate on the choice of those who came physically closest to the ideal of the Nordic man . . . The second principle and virtue which we tried to instil in the SS and to give it an indelible characteristic for the future is the will to freedom and a fighting spirit . . . The third principle and virtue are the concepts of loyalty and honour . . . The fourth principle and virtue that is valid for us is obedience, which does not hesitate for a moment but unconditionally follows every order which comes from the Führer or is legitimately given by a superior.

(Heinrich Himmler, *Speech at the Reich Peasant Congress*,
in UH, p. 66)

Kristallnacht

On 10 November 1938 anti-Jewish demonstrations took place throughout Germany during which Jewish shops were demolished and synagogues set on fire. A witness to this assault in Leipzig was the American Consul David Buffum who described this attack on the Jewish community:

The shattering of shop windows, looting of stores and dwellings of Jews which began in the early hours of 10 November 1938 was hailed subsequently in the Nazi press as a 'spontaneous wave of righteous indignation throughout Germany, as a result of the cowardly Jewish murder of Third Secretary von Rath in the German Embassy at Paris.' . . . At 3 a.m. on 10 November 1938 was unleashed a barrage of Nazi ferocity as had no equal hitherto in Germany, or very

likely anywhere else in the world since savagery began. Jewish buildings were smashed into and contents demolished or looted. In one of the Jewish sections an 18-year-old boy was hurled from a third-storey window to land with both legs broken on a street littered with burning beds and other household furniture and effects from his family and apartments.

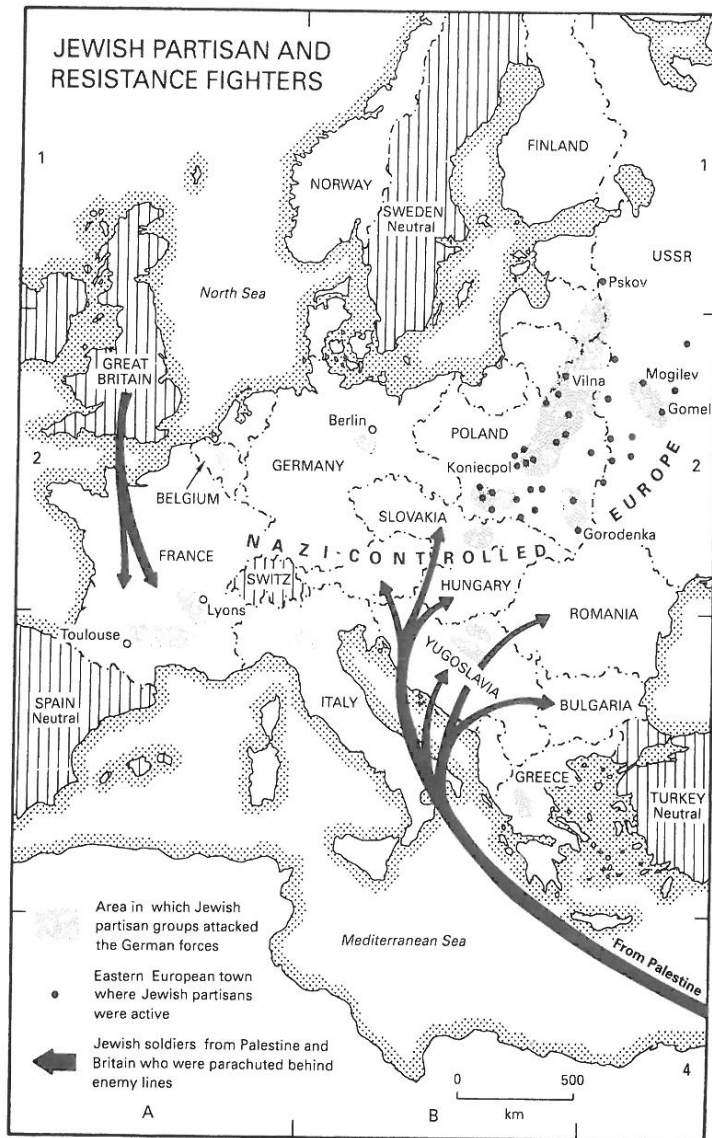
(David Buffum, *Nuremberg Document*,
in UH, p. 97)

The Ghetto

The largest ghetto created by the Nazis was in Warsaw. One of those who visited the Warsaw ghetto provided a chilling account of its residents:

The majority are nightmare figures, ghosts of former human beings, miserable destitutes, pathetic remnants of former humanity. One is most affected by the characteristic change which one sees in their faces: as a result of misery, poor nourishment, the lack of vitamins, fresh air and exercise, the numerous cares, worries, anticipated misfortunes, suffering and sickness, their faces have taken on a skeletal appearance. The prominent bones around their eye sockets, the yellow facial colour, the slack pendulous skin, the alarming emaciation and sickliness. And, in addition, this miserable frightened, restless, apathetic and resigned expression, like that of a hunted animal. I pass my closest friends without recognizing them and guessing their fate. Many of them recognize me, come up to me and ask curiously how things are 'over there' behind the walls – where there is enough fresh air, freedom to move around, and above all freedom . . .

On the streets children are crying in vain, children who are dying of hunger. They howl, beg, sing, moan, shiver with cold, without underwear, without clothing, without shoes, in



Map 66 Jewish partisan and resistance fighters

ragged, sacks, flannel which are bound in strips round the emaciated skeletons, children swollen with hunger, disfigured, half conscious, already completely grown-up at the age of five, gloomy and weary of life. They are like old people and are only conscious of one thing: 'I'm cold', 'I'm hungry'. They have become aware of the most important things in life that quickly. Through their innocent sacrifice and their frightening helplessness the thousands upon thousands of these little beggars level the main accusation against the proud civilization today.

(Stanislav Rozycki, *Description of the Warsaw Ghetto*, UH, pp. 127-128)

The Assault Against Russia

A typical example of the horror that took place throughout Russia occurred in the city of Lvov shortly after the German invasion. At the beginning of the German occupation, Ukrainian mobs murdered Jews wherever they were found. A witness to this onslaught recalled the scene in the yard of a police station where more than 5,000 Jews had been gathered:

Thousands of men were lying here in rows. They lay on their bellies, their faces buried in the sand. Around the perimeter of the field searchlights and machine guns had been set up. Among them I caught sight of German officers standing about. We were ordered to lie flat like the others. We were pushed and shoved brutally, this way and that. My father was separated from me, and I heard him calling out in despair: 'Let me stay with my son! I want to die with my son!' Nobody took any notice of him.

Now that we were all lying still, there was a hush that lasted for a moment or two. Then the 'game' started. We could hear the sound of a man, clearly one of us, stumbling awkwardly around, chased and beaten by another as he went. At last the pursued collapsed out of sheer exhaustion. He was told to rise. Blows were rained down upon him until he dragged himself to his feet again and tried to run forward. He fell to the ground again and tried to run forward. He fell to the ground again and hadn't the strength to get up. When the pursuers were at

last satisfied that the incessant blows had rendered him unable to stir, let alone run, they called a halt and left him there. Now it was the turn of the second victim. He received the same treatment . . .

Thoughts raced in disorder and confusion through my mind. I was so exhausted that I fell asleep. Not even the agonizing screams, the sound of savage blows, or the continual trampling on our bodies could prevent me any longer from sinking into oblivion . . .

The welcome state of unconsciousness passed all too quickly. I came to, and was startled by a painful stab of dazzling light. Powerful searchlights were focused on us. We sat up, one beside the other, so close that we could not stir. Directly in front of me sat two men with shattered skulls. Through the mess of bone and hair I could see the very brains. We whispered to them. We nudged them. But they did not stir. They just sat there, propped up, bulging eyes staring ahead. They were quite dead.

(Leon Weliczker Wells, *Eichmann Trial*,
in UH, pp. 140–141)

DISCUSSION

1. What was the nature of Jewish life in Germany once Hitler became Chancellor?
2. Discuss the racist ideology of the Nazi state and its effect on Jewry.

FURTHER READING

- | | |
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