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How the Holocaust Happened Example

History has many common themes; persecution, genocide and discrimination are just a few of them. The Holocaust is one event that intertwines these three themes. The Jewish people have been persecuted numerous times throughout history. There have also been genocides that killed as many or more people as the Holocaust, such as; the depopulation of the USSR under Stalin between 1929-1939 that claimed approximately 20 million lives, or the killing of the North and South American Indians in the 16th century that claimed 100 million lives. Six million Jewish men, women and children died in the Holocaust. Anti semitism was not unique to 20th Century Germany. Throughout history in Egypt, in the Roman Empire, and all throughout Europe and the Middle East, the Jews were at the very least not wanted and at the most persecuted for being who they are. The Holocaust, if put in all these contexts, is not unique. However there is one circumstance that only the Holocaust had. As Steven T. Katz says in his book, *The Holocaust in Historical Context*, The Holocaust is phenomenologically unique by virtue of the fact that never before has a state set out, as a matter of intentional principle and actualized policy, to annihilate physically every man, women, and child belonging to a specific people. The Holocaust was the first time in history an organized government tried to completely exterminate a group of people. How could something like the Holocaust be allowed to happen? How could a young European country in the midst of a world war create an

incredible killing machine? There are a number of unique and not so unique circumstances that led to the Holocaust. The Holocaust was a tipping point of anti semitic attitudes throughout Germany and Europe as a whole that was possible because of the rise to power of an autocratic leader in a country desperate for change.

The Holocaust wasn't the first time the Jewish people had been persecuted. Just about everywhere they went throughout history, Jews were persecuted for being different. They were a monotheistic people in a world where polytheism was the norm. They engaged in strange customs and traditions that confused outsiders. The Jews also refer to themselves as The Chosen People so it can be assumed that other groups took offense to a group of people blatantly saying that they are better than others. Some of the earliest recorded persecution of the Jews occurred in ancient Egypt, where they were slaves until the Exodus. When they lived under Alexander the Great's rule, they were discouraged from practicing their religion because it made them different from the other populations Alexander conquered. This went against Alexander's dream of uniformity for his kingdom. When Jesus of Nazareth died, it was a common myth that it was the will of a Jewish committee. This myth persists in many to this day, despite the fact that the Catholic Church officially disavowed that belief in 1965. Eventually, when Christianity became the official religion of Rome in 323 AD, Jews living in the Roman empire were persecuted and ridiculed for following their dated religion. Over time the Jewish people spread throughout Europe. They moved to places such as Spain, France, Germany, Poland, Russia, Hungary, and others. However, in many of their new homes, they were not entirely welcome. It was not uncommon for Jewish people to be ran out of towns in France and Germany, although some towns were more welcoming than others. People would accuse them of killing the messiah and question their practicing of certain customs. Places where they did receive some solace, however, was Poland and Russia. The local leaders there saw that the Jewish populations, despite their beliefs and customs, built shops, traded, and helped the villages and towns economically. They remained all over Europe, however there were higher concentrations of Jews in Eastern Europe.

Throughout the years, people's dislike for Jews was limited to blaming them for the death of Jesus of Nazareth, disagreements in their customs and beliefs, and the perception that they always had more money than non-Jews. This began to change in the mid 1800's when a German linguist coined the term Semite. This term in and of itself

was just a term for people of a language background that contained more languages than just those of Romantic and Germanic origin. However, the linguist also attributed the qualities of exclusivity and egoism to semites. This same linguist also attributed the qualities of tolerance and altruism to speakers of Indo-European languages. Although the definition of semite does not specify Jewish people, it was widely understood that if one used the term, they were referring to Jews. Around the same time, Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer were publishing their ideas and research about survival of the most adaptable and survival of the strongest, respectively. Herbert Spencer's ideas of survival of the strongest would become the basis for Social Darwinism. Social Darwinism was the idea that groups of people, whether it be racial groups or otherwise, would undergo the same processes of natural selection as other living things. The beliefs that semites were inferior to Indo-Europeans and Social Darwinism together provided the basis for anti-Jewish racism in Germany and Europe as a whole

Many post-enlightenment thinkers were secular. As a result, they were ideologically opposed to the conservative and religious nature of the Jews. Many adopted these racist beliefs that had already been laid out by prior thinkers, but wanted to deepen them even more. They began to use imagery of blood and inheritance when talking about Jews, things that make a Jewish person inherently different than a non-Jew. Blood couldn't be changed and was inherited. They said that Jews were subhuman, many comparing them to rats or other beasts. As the hatred for Jews grew in Germany, this increasingly scientific community found the need for a more scientific name for Jew hatred. The current term, *Judenhass* (directly translating to Jew hatred), was, Unclean. Many desired a term that didn't include the word Jew in it at all. Eventually, they coined a new, scientific sounding term: Anti semitism.

To add on to historic anti semitism, Germany's economy wasn't in the best shape after World War I. Due to the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, the national debt Germany had accumulated fighting the war, demobilizing their army, converting to a peacetime economy, and supporting veterans and widows, Germany experienced a high amount of unemployment and inflation. By 1923 the German currency wasn't even worth the paper it was printed on, with the exchange rate being 4.2 trillion reichsmark to one dollar. By 1932, when Germany was on the brink of

a depression, the unemployment rate had reached a staggering 32%. The reparations Germany faced after the war didn't help these issues either. The Allies expected the Germans to pay 12.5 billion in reparations, with the estimated payback period to be between 17 and 36 years. In addition to war reparations, the German government also owed its own people 41.5 billion in war bonds. Between 1918 and 1931, Germany's debt amounted to 38% of the country's total national income. In 1922 Germany collected only one fifth of its budget outlays. Germany had a gigantic debt over its head a lot of difficulty trying to pay it. They couldn't raise taxes out of fear for a revolution, and they couldn't borrow money because no one would loan to a government already in so much debt. Germany also couldn't export its goods because tariffs made them too expensive. The only thing they could do in the first ten or so years after the war was print more money.

The shambles that Germany was left in following World War I allowed a radical political party with a hate filled leader to rise to power. It can be argued that the a key factor to the Holocaust was Adolf Hitler himself. After fighting in World War 1, an antisocial Hitler did his best to stay out of the general population. He enlisted as a propaganda officer in Munich, the Bavarian capital of Germany. During this time, he realised, ironically, that he had a knack for public speaking. He continued to develop this skill while he remained enlisted with the army. When he was eventually discharged in 1920, he joined the National Socialist Party. At the time, it was just a fringe far left wing political party with no real power. Hitler began to speak at their rallies and drew bigger and bigger audiences with his speeches. In less than a year, he had worked his way up to leader of the party. He continued to give political speeches, and by 1923 the Nationalist Socialist German Workers Party had 55,000 members. In these speeches, Hitler would often ask for support from the Bavarian Government to help him overthrow the current democratic government in Berlin. Unfortunately for Hitler, they largely ignored these requests.

One day, Hitler found a number of Bavarian leaders having a meeting in a beer hall. Hitler then proceeded to hold them at gunpoint with the help of some members of the Nationalist Socialist Party and demand that they help him march on Berlin and install him as leader of Germany. They played along with him up until one of the Nationalist Socialists mistakenly let them out of the beer hall. They then rescinded their offer to help Hitler, and Hitler was charged with the crime of high treason. Lucky for Hitler, the judge that would be presiding over the trial

was Georg Neithardt, who was known for his contempt for the current German Republic. Georg heavily favored Hitler during the trial, often allowing him to go on lengthy political tirades whilst ignoring pleas for objections from the state prosecutors. This trial was widely covered in the German media due to the severity of the crime and the fact that Hitler was already locally famous. This trial put him into headlines for the duration of the trial, and made his name a household one. At the end of the trial, Georg only sentenced Hitler to a meager 5 years in prison. Hitler would only end up serving 13 months of those 5 years due to his good behavior during his stay. However, those 13 months were long enough to finish an autobiographical book by the name of Mein Kampf (Or My Struggle in English). Mein Kampf explained where his anti semitism came from as well as described his future plans for Germany. Although he released this book on his release from prison, it didn't become a bestseller until after he rose to power.

Upon his release, Hitler gained many followers who believed that he was the change that Germany needed. He continued to give his speeches and he continued to generate more and more membership for the Nazi party. Curious to find out why the members of the Nazi party supported the party, an American sociologist traveled to Germany and hosted an essay writing contest. He challenged Nazi party members to write essays describing why they supported the party and Hitler, with the top essays receiving a cash prize. After receiving and reading the essays, the sociologist found that the three major themes were the sense of national community the party gave them, the idea of a strict chain of command and leadership structure, and anti semitism. With their growing support and the lack of public support for the current German Republic, it was only a matter of time until the Nazis took control.

Germany during the 1930s was transformed into a National Socialist state. The Nazi party in Germany was a combination of fascism with anti semitism and a rallying of the working class. In 1933 Hitler became the chancellor of Germany, and in the subsequent years to come he would further increase his power. Also in 1933 The Enabling Act went into law, allowing Hitler to pass laws without the interference of the German Parliament. By 1934 Hitler governed as the exclusive leader of Germany and as the Fuhrerprinzip. Being the Fuhrerprinzip meant that Hitler and only Hitler spoke for the German people and that only he truly knew what was best for them.

Under this principle, Hitler was supposed to have supreme unrestricted power and the commands he gave and decisions he made were to be treated as laws. Overall, the principles of the Nazi party were greatly shaped by Hitler's own world view. Hitler believed that racial hierarchies were real and valuable. He thought that some races were inherently better than others and that those races that were better, had a duty to rule over the lesser races. In Hitler's eye the supreme race was the Aryan race. Aryans were tall, strong, beautiful, blonde haired, blue eyed people from the northern area of Europe. Hitler believed that the German nation had a duty to protect the Aryan race and instill them into power over other races. This was very ironic because Hitler and many of the Nazi party members were about as far from members of the Aryan race as someone could get. Another principle the Nazis and Hitler believed in was rebuilding the German nation and enhancing its power. Hitler and the Nazis believed that war was both a positive and beneficial force, and that the Germans should become powerful enough to win any war against its racial enemies. Hitler also wanted to deal with the Jewish threat. Hitler actually believed that the Jewish people were the true enemies and that every misfortune that had occurred was their fault.

Hitler wasn't the only German politician that tried to blame the Jews for the country's problems. In 1916 the German high command tried to say that Germany was unable to win the war because Jews were avoiding the draft. So they initiated the Jew Count. What this count actually found was that Jews were actually overrepresented in the military. There were actually 100,000 Jews in the army, 80,000 in combat, 35,000 decorated and 12,000 dead. When the German High Command received these figures they were disappointed and sealed the results, allowing fake results to be printed by the media.

Another manifestation of anti semitism occurred in 1935 in the form of the Nuremberg laws. These laws were unanimously passed by the Reichstag and limited the freedoms of German Jews. These laws included rules prohibiting marriage between and extramarital sex between Jews and non Jews. These laws also prohibited Jewish children from attending German schools, and banned Jewish teachers from teaching. This segregation turned the Jews into outcasts in German society, and made life as a Jew even more difficult than it already was.

Another factor culminating in the Holocaust was human nature. There have been numerous psychological studies

that have tried to make sense out of how everyday people could allow the Holocaust to happen. Surely not every person in Germany or every person who participated in the Holocaust was a Nazi or a radical anti semite? The answer to that question lies in human nature. In 1963 Stanley Milgram conducted his famous obedience experiment to try and understand how the German people could allow and or participate in the Holocaust. The participants in the experiments were the teachers who had to teach the learner word pairs. The learner was thought by the participant to be another participant, but was actually a confederate of the experiment. For every word pair the learner got wrong, the participant was supposed to administer an electric shock to the learner ranging from 15 volts, a slight shock, to 375 volts, a severe shock to 450, labeled a lethal shock. The aim of the experiment was to see how far a normal person was willing to go in obeying instructions if those instructions were to harm another person. When Milgram first designed the experiment he hypothesized that only 1-3% of participants would administer the lethal shock. However after repeating the experiment 18 times the results showed the 65% of people would administer the lethal shock if they weren't responsible for the learner. In other words, if the administerer of the experiment claimed responsibility for the well being of the person receiving the shock, the participant would more often than not deliver a lethal shock. Also when there was a second teacher in the room that the participant could instruct to administer shocks, 92.5 of participants would administer the 450 volt shock.

What the Milgram experiment showed was that when people aren't held responsible for their actions or when the harm their causing isn't very personal, almost anyone is capable of doing awful things. The fact that almost anyone is capable of doing awful things isn't to say that the people who participated in the experiments were bad people. What it does reveal though is that humans tend to obey authority figures. More evidence to support these ideas comes in Christopher Browning's book *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*. In this book Browning follows the men of Reserve Police Battalion 101 who were by every account ordinary men. These men were not killers by nature, before the war they were just regular citizens, business owners, doctors, lawyers, etc. They weren't all extremely anti semitic, most weren't even members of the Nazi party. These men participated in the Holocaust for a number of reasons. Some were anti semitic, some participated because of peer pressure, some because they didn't want to seem like lesser men and some

participated because they feared they wouldn't have a career with the police after the war if they didn't. They also participated because there was no open objection to what was going on. No one was speaking out against what was happening. Some people found ways to avoid participation but they never tried to stop anyone else from participating. Another reason why it was easy for these men to participate in the Holocaust was because they weren't killing day in and day out. Yes, the men of Reserve Police Battalion 101 did kill Jews and even massacre the elderly and women and children, but that wasn't part of their day to day affairs. Most of the time these men were rounding up Jews in Ghettos and shipping them to concentration camps. The only killing done in the Ghettos was of those who couldn't make it to the trains, and the majority of that killing was done by the Hiwis, the ones who did actually enjoy killing. Over time some men in the battalion did come to like killing but they didn't start out that way. The men of Reserve Police Battalion 101 were products of their situation and of human nature. put in their shoes, most people who probably act as they did.

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