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The Holocaust: how it Came to be Example

The Holocaust is a part of human history that baffles many, and understandably so due to its magnitude. One may find it difficult to conceptualize the sheer number of innocent people killed at the hands of such hatred. Many people wonder how the Holocaust came to creation. Though the Holocaust is a result of an innumerable number of influences, the political and economic situation of Germany following World War I as well as Hitler's subsequent and rapid rise to power largely influenced the conception of this genocide. Devastated with the results of the war and being forced to pay extensive reparations, Germany was in desperate need of a confident leader. Hitler capitalized upon Germany's disparity in order to quickly rise to power and normalize his contempt for Jews. Anti-Semitic legislation created a scapegoat for the hardships of the country, further intensifying the hatred of Jews. The Holocaust, one of the largest genocides in human history, stemmed not only from the detrimental effects of World War One on Germany's economy but was also cultivated through the organized campaign of Hitler that deemed Jews as subhuman. The dehumanization of Jews at the hands of Hitler allowed German citizens to become bystanders to the extermination of an entire population.

Hitler's rise to power and ability to spread Anti-Semitism results solely from the political and economic climate

which he entered himself into following the first World War. Pre-war Germany and post-war Germany held stark differences in terms of economic prosperity. Before the war, Germany was among the highest economically advanced country in Europe. During the war, Germany was unable to import or export goods. As trade restrictions began to intensify, the small number of resources available in the country were allocated towards the war effort. As the war progressed, war bonds were sold to the public to avoid raising taxes. War bonds were purchased by citizens in order to support the war effort with a promise of the bond amount being paid back. By the end of the war, the government was barren of resources and the German population had driven themselves into debt. The Treaty of Versailles, implemented after the war, drove Germany even deeper into economic disparity. The treaty required Germany to pay extensive war reparations and in turn, put an economic strain on a country already trying to recover from the effects of war. In 1921, this amount was set at ??6.6 billion; a sum that Germany could not pay. By December 1922, because the German government could not pay, French and Belgian troops invaded and occupied the Ruhr to take goods and raw materials in lieu of money, (Economic Issues in the 1920s). The presence of French and Belgian troops in Germany launched the economy of the country into a downward spiral.

Humiliated by the results of the war, the German government refused to adhere to the French and Belgian troops influence. This refusal would prove to have further detrimental effects on the country's post-war economy. Thousands of French and Belgian troops seized control of factories, railways, and coal mines by January of 1922. German workers were urged not to comply with the soldiers and many went on strike. (Economic Issues in the 1920s) The strike of German workers, however, only lead to inflation as Germany began to print more money to support the unemployed and pay debts. As more money was being printed, and fewer goods remained in the country prices rose. The government printed more money in an effort to compensate for the price of goods. Soon German currency was of little worth. (Kenney & Chace 2011) One might question those who complied to the wishes of the German government by going on strike. However, the country desperately sought to rebuild the nationalism that bonded them together during the war. Clearly, the citizens and government of Germany were in need of a strong leader to help restore economic peace and build the morale of the country. Hitler gladly stepped up to fulfill this role as leader.

Hitler's name alone carries a heavy connotation. His name brings to mind hatred, Nazism, and Anti-Semitism. The unique economic situation in Germany permitted Hitler to rise to power. In any other circumstance, a man with such rigid prejudices would not rise to power in the manner that Hitler did. Political strife dominated the country, giving rise to new forms of government. As David F. Crew explains,

Fascist political parties and ideologies burst on to the political scenes of many European countries after the end of the war in 1918. Europeans turned to these conservative, rigid parties in response to the massive social disorder caused by this war that killed millions of soldiers in the trenches, threatened millions of civilians with starvation, and destroyed several European governments (12).

Hitler understood the concerns of the German citizens following the war and used propaganda as well as his ability to speak to crowds in order to gain a large following. Hitler used his own skills of oratory to appeal to the patriotism of the German people by promising to break free of the restrictions of the Treaty of Versailles. His aim of ending the payment of reparations was especially popular, (How Did the Nazis Gain Support). Hitler inserted himself into a broken country, who was struggling to recover and pay back war reparations; as well as wanting to find a strong leading government, in order to annihilate the Jewish population. His first steps towards annihilating the Jewish population was to enforce Nuremberg laws which deemed Jews as second-class citizens in their own country.

Anti-Semitism was not a new concept in Germany. Unfortunately, Hitler cannot be held solely responsible for the Anti-Semitism that starkly increased following World War I. His campaign simply shed light on the pre-existing beliefs of a large majority of the country. As Nick Shepley states, Hitler was the self-appointed spokesman for a generation of Germans, both military and civilian, who wanted to know why the war had been lost and inventing the fantasy of a Jewish conspiracy was convenient, (page 11). The Nuremberg and Anti-Semitic laws enforced by Hitler only further legalized the contempt Germans held against Jews living amongst them. In a sense, the Nuremberg Laws were the beginning of the end of Jewish acceptance in Germany. By stripping Jews of their humanity through these laws, the rationalization of their genocide became increasingly accepted. Richard

Heideman supports this notion by stating,

The establishment of the Nuremberg Laws was a defining moment in history [. . .] These laws emboldened an entire nation to turn against their fellow citizens, neighbors, colleagues, and friends, many of whom had fought alongside them in the First World War, and subjected the Jewish people to social, economic, and political isolation, ultimately culminating in the attempted mass extermination and genocide of an entire people and other minorities, (par 1).

One would find it hard to imagine what it would be like to be a Jewish citizen at the time that Hitler rose to power. The Nuremberg laws certainly made the Jewish existence bleak far before anyone was hauled out of the country. There was no escape from the constant persecution, due to the fact that the persecution was government sanctioned. There was no area safe from the hatred, which steadily increased within the country. Jewish businesses were often destroyed, as well as Jews were often fired during this time. Jewish citizens were completely barred from any occupation allowing self-representation such as media, journalism, public office, etc. (Heideman, par 6) As time went on the Jewish experience in Germany grew increasingly worse. German government undoubtedly made Jewish existence abysmal, but their experience grew increasingly worse as Jews witnessed former neighbors, business partners, friends, etc. turn on them in support of the Nuremberg Laws set in place against Jews.

Though the Nuremberg laws were created by Hitler and the German government, the citizens of Germany played an equal if not a larger role in enforcing these laws. When thinking about the dynamic in Germany at the time, one can think of the German government like a match and the German population like gasoline. The government brings the anti-Semitism already present in the country to light. The gasoline or the German population is simply looking for a fuel source to ignite the feelings of Anti-Semitism already at play. When Hitler rose to power and began enforcing the Nuremberg Laws he served as a match to light the gasoline represented by the German population. The gasoline, readily flammable, ignites intensely and erratically. In this case, the persecution and eventual genocide of the Jews is the result of the reaction. The effects of the fire combining with the gasoline are

much more catastrophic than the effect of a single match alone. Similar to how the combination of German support and Hitler's plans lead to much more catastrophic reality for Jews. Richard Heideman cites a perfect example of the influence of the government on the German population. Signs stating Jews Not Welcome were placed in storefront windows. Soon enough, signs and banners stating the same message were plastered in several locations in Germany. However, these signs and banners were not placed by the government, but rather the Jewish citizens. These actions speak loudly to the influence of the German government on its citizens (par 7).

Under Hitler's strong leadership and his organized campaign to dehumanize Jews, Germany was a ticking time bomb in regards to the genocide that was soon to follow. One may identify the importance of defining genocide and understanding how it comes to fruition when studying the origins of the Holocaust. Genocides are unique in comparison to the wars that plague our history books because, in contrast to wars, where two forces are fighting with intentions to defeat the other, genocide involves one group that attacks with no reciprocation from the targeted group. Genocide by definition is, a form of one-sided mass killing in which a state or other authority intends to destroy a group, as that group and membership in it are defined by the perpetrator, (Chalk and Jonassohn 23). Hitler, from the beginning of his rise to power, defined the Jews as the perpetrator and defined their existence within Germany for decades to come.

The mass murder of an entire population does not happen overnight, or at the hands of one person. The criminalization of a certain group of people must be supported by not only the government but the majority of a country's populous. Certain conditions have to be proven true in order for a genocide to occur. The perception of the victims of a genocide is crucial. As Frank Chalk and Curt Jonassohn explain, The victims must not only not be equals, but also clearly defined as something less than fully human [. . .] Thus, in order to perform a genocide, the perpetrator has always had to first organize a campaign that redefined the victim group as worthless, outside the web of mutual obligations, a threat to the people, immoral sinners, and/or subhuman (28).

Hitler certainly defines the Jews as a group separate from the rest of the German population. By emphasizing the superiority of the Aryan race, and the inferiority of the Jews, he instills division within an already war-broken

country. By integrating Anti-Semitic legislation in Germany, Hitler effectively makes it acceptable to not only hold contempt against Jews but act upon that contempt in support of the law. With the belief that Jews were subhuman, thieves, and a plague to their society, German citizens bound together and found the unity they desperately desired following the war in the common goal of purging their country of the evil in the Jewish population. The purging of the evil considered to be Jews would not have been possible without the consent of the German people. Richard Heideman states,

Without the German people's consent and approval, it would have been impossible for the Nazis to enforce their inhumane laws. By first convincing the average German that the loss of the First World War and the economic hardship that followed was all because of the Jews, and subsequently identifying the dangers they represented to every man, woman, and child, the Nazis made the Jew the common enemy of every German and the Reich as a whole. This false predicate served as a foundation for the determination and decision that the only answer was extermination as the final solution to the ""Jewish Question"" (par 25).

Ostracized from society, Jews desperately sought for someone to advocate on their behalf. Fortunately, there were Germans who saw the humanity in Jews and disagreed with the Anti-Semitism rampant in the country, but advocating for Jews was no simple task. Raul Hilberg states, It was difficult to revolt against established order in a society where people were more likely to revolt against revolution, and it was doubly difficult, as well as doubly dangerous, to do so once all the decrees had been put into place and the trains began to roll. The helper in Germany was almost alone, (197). Additionally, The constant presence of the Nazi police force known as the Gestapo most definitely hindered German citizens from advocating on behalf of Jews. German citizens saw what these men were capable of doing to Jews, and certainly did not desire the same fate for themselves. In reference to the presence of the Gestapo, Robert Gellately states, It is true that the citizen never felt far from the gaze of Nazis, whether in public, at work, or even at home, (44). Though the structure in which the Holocaust occurred made it difficult to advocate on behalf of Jews, the majority of inaction can be stemmed back to the indifference of the German people. As the day to day life of the ordinary German citizen improved, it became increasingly easier to look the other way when the extermination of the Jewish population went into full effect.

Based on the belief that Jews were subhuman, many Germans were indifferent to the Jewish plight. This indifference allowed Jewish extermination to occur under their nose. The unfortunate truth about the Holocaust is that many Germans led completely ordinary lives. As Eric A. Johnson writes, Most [Germans] slept soundly at night. Why should they not have? The economy was improving, most were finding employment, and their country was regaining its pride and still at peace, (253). Towards the later stages of the Holocaust when Jews were sent to concentration camps, it was much easier for the average German not to concern themselves with the well being of the Jews. This attitude of indifference is what allowed the extermination of Jews to exist. Clearly, Hitler's influence and ability to portray Jewish citizens as subhuman plays a larger role in the genocide that stains German history.

The Holocaust will forever be a stain in German history as well as human history. The effects of World War One on the German economy clearly set the scene for the conception of the Holocaust. The Nuremberg Laws and Hitler's fast rise to power sanctioned legal persecution of Jews in Germany. Stemming from the belief that Jews were inferior, many Germans took an indifferent stance towards the plight of the Jews and became bystanders to the genocide. The Holocaust did not occur in one night but rather stemmed from a deep hatred spread by the highest authority in the country and legalized by Hitler. When studying the Holocaust one needs to find it crucial to remember the detrimental effects that hate can bring about and work to prevent a similar occurrence for the future.