

Setting the Stage

After World War I, Germany was in shambles and its people, led to believe they were winning the war right up until defeat, were in shock. Their leader, the Kaiser, was forced to step down and the Treaty of Versailles led to significant loss of land and citizens. In February 1919, a new German government was created: the Weimar Republic. The constitution of the Weimar Republic was very progressive and allowed women the right to vote, freedom of speech, and freedom of religion. However, as an emergency measure in the name of national security, Article 48 of the Weimar Constitution allowed for the suspension of these civil liberties.

In 1932, Adolf Hitler, leader of the nationalistic, antisemitic and racist National Socialist German Workers' Party (Nazi Party), was elected to the German Reichstag (Parliament). In January 1933, he was appointed Chancellor by President von Hindenburg. After the Reichstag fire, Hitler manipulated Article 48 and passed the Enabling Act, which allowed him to pass laws without the approval of the Reichstag or the President. This was the beginning of the end of the Weimar Republic. The Nazis established a single party dictatorship referred to as the Third Reich. From 1933 until 1939, the Nazi government enacted hundreds of increasingly restrictive and discriminatory laws and decrees that banned Jews from all aspects of German public life.



Above: Photograph of Jewish Survivor, Renée Firestone, with her parents, Julia and Mauritius Weinfeld. Julia was killed at Auschwitz; Mauritius died shortly after liberation.

Genocide

“The Holocaust was the systematic, bureaucratic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of six million Jews by the Nazi regime and its collaborators. Holocaust is a word of Greek origin meaning ‘sacrifice by fire’” (U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum).

During World War II, the Nazis systematically targeted Jews in Nazi occupied territories. Jews were forced to wear identifying symbols, relocate to heavily crowded ghettos, and participate in forced labor. Millions of Jews were murdered during the Holocaust. The Nazis also targeted racial, political, or ideological groups deemed “inferior” or “undesirable” – “Roma (Gypsies), homosexuals, Slavic peoples, the mentally and physically disabled, Socialists, Communists, and Jehovah’s Witnesses. Within several years, mass murder became the official Nazi policy (officially organized at the 1942 Wannsee Conference). By then, the Nazis had already deployed Einsatzgruppen (mobile killing units) to massacre Jewish communities in Poland and the Soviet Union. The Nazis also used poisonous gas, in vans and later in gas chambers at six death camps (Chelmno, Auschwitz, Majdanek, Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka). Even when their defeat was imminent, the Nazi leadership committed resources to the destruction of Europe’s Jewish population. Prisoners were forced to evacuate in what are now known as Death Marches.

Fall of the Third Reich

When the Allied troops (led by the United States, United Kingdom, and Soviet Union) defeated the Nazis, they encountered evidence of genocide: documentation, witnesses, mass graves, and concentration and death camps. Europe was in disarray; millions were displaced, and entire cities were destroyed. Displaced persons camps were established to house Jewish survivors. Many Jews continued to face antisemitism and violence and most Jews decided to emigrate. The Nuremberg Tribunal was established and tried 22 members of the Nazi leadership for war crimes but the majority eluded justice.

Holocaust Testimony

USC Shoah Foundation’s Visual History Archive (VHA) preserves firsthand experiences and memories of the Holocaust from 20 collections. The VHA contains over 55,000 testimonies of Holocaust survivors and witnesses, including, Jewish Survivors, Rescuer and Aid Providers, Liberators, Sinti and Roma Survivors, Political Prisoners, Jehovah’s Witness Survivors, War Crimes Trial Participants, Non-Jewish Forced Laborers, Eugenic Policies Survivors, and Homosexual Survivors. The vast majority of the testimony was collected between 1994 and 1999, and the interviewees detail their lives before, during, and after the Holocaust. The testimonies average about two hours in length.