

The Centre for Holocaust Education & Scholarship The Nuremberg Laws



Hitler & The Nazi Party's Rise to Power

In the 1924 election, Hitler's National Socialist German Workers' Party (the Nazi Party) was virtually unknown in Germany and garnered only 3% of the vote to the Reichstag (the German Parliament).

In 1924 Hitler wrote a book titled 'Mein Kampf' in which he detailed his plan to transform Germany into a race based society. He wrote of his belief in the international Jewish conspiracy that threatened world domination. He wrote that Jews were the mortal enemy of the German people.

The early 1930s saw a deep and worldwide economic depression. Germany was suffering great hardship. Losing World War I humiliated the Germans. The Allies exacerbated Germany's humiliation by demanding huge compensation, by forcing Germany to relinquish land and by imposing a limit on the size of Germany's army. Millions of Germans were out of work. Inflation was rampant. The population had little faith in its government (the Weimar Republic) and was desperate for change.

Successfully using Jews as the scapegoat for all of Germany's political, economic and social ills, Hitler and the Nazi Party's rise to power was breathtakingly rapid. Hitler mesmerized ever-larger crowds with his portrayal of Jews as sub-human, vile, inferior beings interested only in their own economic interests or in communism. He promised to actively suppress Jews, to strip Jews of citizenship and civil rights, to build a society based on race under a new, powerful Germany ruled by a strong, central government. He promised a better life for all Germans. Hitler's rallies became massive and his speeches were greeted with much approving vigour. His particular appeal was to the legions of unemployed, to young people and to the lower middle class.

In the 1932 election, the Nazis won more than 33% of the vote, which was more than any other party. In January 1933, Hitler was appointed the head (Chancellor) of the German government.

Upon attaining power, the Nazis began implementing their policies of removing Jews from German society:

01 April 1933 - a National boycott of Jewish businesses was declared;

07 April 1933 - a law was passed excluding Jews from the civil service, the legal profession, the medical profession, the education system;

10 May 1933 - a nationwide book burning of all Jewish and non-German books was conducted; and

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July 1933 - naturalized German Jews were stripped of their citizenship.

In short order, the German population disengaged from contact with Jews on every level. Under these oppressive conditions, Jewish businesses lost their customer base, could no longer contract with German businesses or suppliers and, eventually were no longer able to operate. German entrepreneurs swooped in and took advantage of the situation. The search to route out Jews, including those who had converted to other religions, was relentless. More than 10,000 public health and social workers lost their positions. 4,000 lawyers lost their right to practice, 2,000 doctors lost their positions in hospitals and clinics, 2,000 actors, singers and musicians could no longer find work, 1200 editors and journalists were dismissed as were 800 university professors and lecturers and 800 more elementary and secondary school teachers.

German Jews were the subject of an endless series of discriminatory laws. During Hitler's twelve years in power, over 400 separate laws and regulations were declared against Jews prohibiting everything from using a telephone, performing in an orchestra, to the innocuous activity of owning a cat.

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On the 15 September 1935 the Nuremberg Laws were introduced by the Government at a special meeting convened at the annual Nuremberg Rally of the Nazi Party. The Nuremberg Laws were designed to protect German blood and were in fact two distinct laws, collectively called The Nuremberg Laws:

1. The Law For The Protection Of German Blood And Honour prohibited marriage and extramarital intercourse between Jews and Germans and also prohibited Jewish households from employing German women under the age of 45.
2. The Reich Citizenship Law declared only those of German or related blood were eligible to be citizens. All others were classed as state subjects who had no rights of citizenship, for example the right to vote.

In November 1935 laws were passed defining who was a Jew. The determination was based on one's grandparents. It mattered not if your parents had converted to Catholicism and had been practicing Catholics for years. Being a Jew was no longer a matter of self-identification or self-determination. Being a Jew was now decided by the government.

As he was concerned about possible negative international opinion, Hitler ordered that The Nuremberg Laws and other overt suppressive measures against Jews were not to be enforced until after the Olympics held in Berlin in the summer of 1936. Jewish athletes were not allowed to participate.

After the Olympics concluded and the international community went home, the Nazi government and its citizens turned their full attention, laws and wrath on the Jews of Germany. Spontaneous, violent attacks on Jews became ever more prevalent and ever more brutal.

To leave Germany, Jews were required to pay up to 90% of their wealth as a tax. In any event, by 1938 it was virtually impossible to find a country willing to take Jews. Once the Nazis realized their deportation schemes were untenable, mid-1941 marked the beginning of the mass extermination of the Jews of Germany and the Jews of Europe.

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A professor from Frankfurt University in Germany reflects on his reaction as well as his colleagues during the period of the Nazi Regime:

Too Busy to Think

...The dictatorship, and the whole process of its coming into being, was above all diverting. It provided an excuse not to think for people who did not want to think anyway. I do not speak of your “little men,” your baker and so on; I speak of my colleagues and myself, learned men, mind you. Most of us did not want to think about fundamental things and never had.

Waiting to React

One doesn't see exactly where or how to move. Believe me, this is true. Each act, each occasion, is worse than the last, but only a little worse. You wait for the next and the next. You wait for one great shocking occasion, thinking that others, when such a shock comes, will join with you in resisting somehow. You don't want to act, or even talk alone; you don't want to “go out of your way to make trouble.” Why not? – Well, you are not in the habit of doing it. And it is not just fear, fear of standing alone, that restrains you; it is also genuine uncertainty.

Small Steps

But the one great shocking occasion, when tens or hundreds of thousands will join with you, never comes. That's the difficulty. If the last and worst act of the whole regime had come immediately after the first and smallest, thousands, yes millions, would have been sufficiently shocked – if, let us say, the gassing of the Jews in the '43 had come immediately after the “German Firm” stickers on the windows of the non-Jewish shops in '33. But of course this isn't the way it happens. In between come all the hundreds of little steps, some of them imperceptible, each of them preparing you not to be shocked by the next. Step C is not much worse than Step B, and, if you did not make a stand at Step B, why should you stand at Step C? And so on to Step D.

Too Late

And one day, too late, your principles, if you were ever sensible of them, all rush in upon you. The burden of self-deception has grown too heavy, and some minor incident, in my case my little boy, hardly more than a baby, saying “Jew swine,” collapses it all at once, and you see that everything, everything, has changed and changed completely under your nose. The world you live in – your nation, your people – is not the world you were born in at all.

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How the Nuremberg Laws affected even old relationships.

Marta Appel, like many Germans of the Jewish faith, found that the Nuremberg Laws affected even old friendships. For years, she had been getting together once a month with women from her old high school. In 1935, she stopped attending, mainly because she did not want to embarrass her non-Jewish friends.

One day on the street, I met one of my old teachers, and with tears in her eyes she... tried to convince me that [the women] were still my friends, and tried to take away my doubts. I decided to go to the next meeting. It was a hard decision and I had not slept the night before. I was afraid for my gentile friends. For nothing in the world did I wish to bring them trouble by my attendance, and I was also afraid for myself. I knew I would watch them, noticing the slightest expression of embarrassment in their eyes when I came. I knew they could not deceive me; I would be aware of every change in their voices. Would they be afraid to talk to me?

It was not necessary for me to read their eyes or listen to the changes in their voices. The empty table in the little alcove that had always been reserved for us spoke the clearest language. It was even unnecessary for the waiter to come and say that a lady phoned that morning not to reserve the table thereafter. I could not blame them. Why should they risk losing a position only to prove to me that we still had friends in Germany?