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Why the Holocaust was the Most Important Event of the Twentieth Century

Many think that the genocides of a people are long-gone acts, but in truth, the Holocaust happened only eighty years ago. The Holocaust was one of the most impactful and unfathomable events of the Twentieth Century. Known as the Shoah in Hebrew, it was an evil act orchestrated by Nazi Germany throughout the 1930s and 1940s to wipe out all Jews. It resulted in the killing of six million Jews, one and a half million of them children. Its effects are clearly seen when investigating the persecution of Jews, the population of international Jewry, and Holocaust education in schools. Its less obvious repercussions include reparations given to Jews, the establishment of the state of Israel, Jewish immigration after the Holocaust, and the world's perception of genocides.

Before the rise of Adolf Hitler and the antisemitic Nazi Party, the Jewish population of Europe was thriving and was not in danger of ultimate persecution. Before any persecution began to take place, the European Jewish population had reached a peak of about 9,000,000 people. In Germany alone, there were about 600,000 Jews. Many of these 600,000 were loyal to their country and almost 100,000 had defended Germany in the First World War. The Jews of Europe were able to live relatively normal lives, without fear of being killed for their backgrounds or beliefs.

Unfortunately, this all changed during Adolf Hitler's emergence and takeover of the German government. Hitler, an extremely racist and cruel man, held ideals that included loathing Jews, Roma, and disabled people. Homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, and political dissidents were his additional targets. He instituted a racial hierarchy with Aryans at the top and Jews at the very bottom. In general, he saw the Aryan race as superior to other groups of people, and it was the centerpiece of his worldview.

After January 30th, 1933, the day Hitler seized the government, the Nazi Party started to enable Hitler's heinous agenda. Hitler had convinced the entire party and nation that Jews in the government were responsible for Germany's defeat in World War One. This was mainly seen when Nazi leadership organized an economic boycott of German Jews' businesses and establishments. This was supposed to symbolize revenge against apparent *Greuelpropaganda*, 'Jewish propaganda' that damaged Nazi Germany's reputation. The Star of David, an iconic Jewish symbol, was manipulated to be used as a derogatory demarcation for Jews. It was placed upon Jewish-owned establishments and served as a barrier to Aryans, Hitler's so-called "master race." Additionally, acts of violence against Jews during the boycott were shrugged off by the police. This signaled that the would-be protectors of the nation did not protect Jews. Although it did not cause much devastation among Jewish businesses, it marked the unmistakable primary sign of Jewish oppression.

Following the economic anti-Jewish boycott, laws were put in place by the Nazi Party to further push their diabolical ideas. Between 1933 and 1938, numerous laws were passed. To fully segregate Jews and Aryans, Hitler made sure they were ostracized: "This enabled the Nazi hate to define Jews as an alien race living among Germans and encouraged non-Jewish Germans to become desensitized to what was happening to them." This became exceedingly obvious after more laws were passed to limit Jews' rights. The Nazi Party first banned Jewish people from working for the Civil Service and Jews were subsequently banned from owning or running farms. The real turning point for Jewish persecution appeared with the Nuremberg Laws in 1935. Two laws, claiming to protect "true Aryan" Germans, stripped Jews of citizenship and their rights to have intimate relationships with Aryans. The social death of Jews in Europe was a prerequisite for their genocide.

During Hitler's reign, his attitude towards Jews worsened and his real goals were carried out. Hitler was antisemitic in a way that blamed Jews for their alleged nefarious racial, economic, and political goals, all of which weakened Jews' status in society. In 1933, Jews were placed into concentration camps, used to imprison political opponents and persecuted minorities, and put them to forced labor. The Nazis used extensive anti-Jewish propaganda, and subsequently, there were almost 400 anti-Jewish decrees passed in Hitler's first six years. Perhaps the most memorable of these antisemitic actions is Kristallnacht, the Night of Broken Glass. On November 9th, 1938, Nazis

enabled violence as a way to publicly humiliate and discriminate against Jews. Their excuse was that a Jewish student in Germany lashed at and killed an Aryan worker because he was angry about his peoples' discrimination. Hitler orchestrated the destruction of over 7,000 Jewish businesses and 900 synagogues in Austria and Germany. Thirty thousand Jews were sent to concentration camps and 91 Jews were killed. Many Germans in the government issued instructions to the police officers: they should arrest every Jew they see and all Jewish homes or establishments were to be destroyed. Kristallnacht allowed Germany to finally remove Jews from German life. As Hitler expanded his empire, his sovereignty of total terror gripped many other countries. Once Poland was invaded in 1939, the Second World War began, where Germany fought the Soviet Union, the United States, and Britain, known as the Allies. In Eastern Europe alone, Germany's power extended over several million Jews. Many Jews were placed into ghettos, or temporary jails with brick walls and barbed wire. This was another discriminative step the Nazis took in segregating Jews from the rest of the population. However, this did not suit Germany's needs and Jews were moved to concentration camps. The S.S., or Schutzstaffel, a paramilitary branch of the Nazi Party, was responsible for bringing Jews to concentration camps, infernal places where Jews, Romani, gays, and more were gassed, tortured, and killed. Half of all Shoah victims died here. The camps served as exclusively killing camps, a tool for Hitler's Final Solution: a genocide of Jews. Disease and starvation, omnipresent in the camps, became a large deadly factor. Many died during horrific medical experiments committed by the Nazis. The most lethal part was the gas chambers, where men, women, and children were ruthlessly gassed with poisonous gas. The largest of the death camps, Auschwitz, was the deadliest. In 1945, there were over 700,000 prisoners at Auschwitz. Children and elders were sent to work while others were sent directly to their deaths. People who were deemed unworthy were usually killed within the first three hours of their arrival. These inhumane camps were designed to kill people through brutal methods because the Nazis wanted to eliminate them.

Eventually, Germany could no longer keep its actions a secret and the public uncovered the horrors of the Shoah. A poll conducted in early 1943 in America asked citizens if they thought it was true that two million European Jews had been killed so far. Only 47% of those surveyed believed what they heard, and 29% dismissed it as a rumor. It highlighted just how little Americans knew of the genocide taking place as they were speaking. One Polish man, Jan Karski, was able to sneak into the Warsaw ghetto and see firsthand the atrocities being committed. In 1942, he started to expose Nazi Germany's actions to the British, Polish, and American governments. Another group attempted to do the same thing. Led by Ben Hecht in 1943, the production *We Will Never Die* was broadcasted to millions of Americans. The play's goal was to alert the public about the Nazi slaughter. It was quite successful and even managed to finance groups that aided Jews in Europe. However, the Allies ultimately failed to help stop the genocide in the grand scheme of things.

After 12 years, the concentration camps were finally discovered and liberated. This was largely due to World War Two ending and the Allied armies' reclaiming of Eastern Europe. The Germans running the camps knew they could not keep up the genocide without being further discovered, therefore, they held death marches for prisoners before the Allies would arrive. With their army exhausted from six years of war and the Allies closing in from the east and west, the Nazis attempted to eradicate evidence of their guilt. The biting cold of the winter was only another factor that aggravated these marches, as tens of thousands of prisoners were made to walk long distances with no food, water, or rest. After this whole ordeal at Auschwitz, only about 6,000 prisoners remained from the original 1.1 million. The ones to discover these death camps were the Soviets, when they came across Majdanek, a Polish death camp, in 1944. Soon after, the Russians stumbled upon Auschwitz. The liberation of these camps was not the principal objective of the Allies' plans; nonetheless, the Russians worked to save the remaining prisoners. Later in 1945, U.S. troops liberated the camps of Buchenwald, Dachau, Nordhausen, Mauthausen, and Ohrdruf. The Germans, who had abandoned the camps, left the personal belongings of the victims unearthed. At Auschwitz, the Soviets discovered hundreds of thousands of men's suits, more than 800,000 women's outfits, and more than 14,000 pounds of human hair. Soldiers liberating the camps were aghast at the scale of terror the Nazis enforced.

The Nazi government finally surrendered in 1945 following Hitler's suicide. Germany's surrender and actions left a legacy of shame upon its people. German people as a whole either helped the Nazis or were ineffective in stopping them. The country spent years trying to recover from its shame. Germany started paying reparations to Jews in 1953. They additionally made attempts to help the state of Israel, where many survivors resided. In 1999, the now united German parliament voted to erect a Holocaust memorial in Berlin. Also, the Allies made the German government pay war victims and helped the survivors get services and compensation for their missing properties. Those direct repercussions greatly damaged Germany's economy but improved the life conditions of people struck by the Shoah.

It was only a few months after Auschwitz was liberated that people became aware of what had happened. When photos taken at the camps began to circulate, the inhumane atrocities became topical. When Dachau, Buchenwald, and Bergen-Belsen were freed by the Western Allies, even more news began to spread. It made it onto the front pages of newspapers in countries across the globe. All of a sudden, Germany was known as the "concentration camp

country". To help the news disseminate faster, there were radio broadcasts, newsreels, magazine spreads, pamphlets, exhibitions, and speeches made. As more news was reported, people around the world became horrified by the stories. This shock was so extreme that people started to be xenophobic towards Germans as a result of all this publicity. These reports, pictures, and movies in cinemas were influential in terms of learning about the atrocities early on.

Seeing the atrocities and evils committed by the Nazis, the Allies put Nazi officials and leaders on trial in Nuremberg, Germany. The Nuremberg War Crimes trials started largely due to the public reaction to the images of the camps. These were a series of 12 trials where 161 Nazi leaders were convicted of crimes against humanity, bringing a sliver of justice to the victims of the Holocaust. These trials inspired many other Nazi trials around the globe. Perhaps an even more lasting impact, these trials also gave meaning to the term "genocide": the deliberate murder of a people from a particular background to destroy their nation. The United Nations went on to adopt this as an official crime. The term, which is now generally in usage, was brought to life because of the Holocaust.

Further trauma was imposed on the prisoners after their liberation. Thousands of displaced people had nothing to their names and nowhere to go. Then arose the problem of immigration and pogroms. The Jews were placed into Displaced Persons Camps, temporary refugee camps made by the Allies. Although they were meant to be refugees, they were horrific in terms of material conditions: the oppressed had to reside with the oppressors. In an attempt to aid Jews by letting them immigrate to the U.S, President Truman issued the Truman Directive in 1945. It instructed immigration officials to favor Displaced Persons coming from Europe in immigration quotas. At the same time, European antisemitism was still fervently rising. The Polish pogroms that killed 70 Jews in 1946 pushed the U.S. to increase its quotas further. The loosening of American immigration quotas helped mitigate the problem of Holocaust refugees.

Zionism, the desire to return to their homeland, had appealed to Jews ever since their first exile, in 586 BCE. Now, after the genocide, the push to establish Israel was stronger than it ever had been. Most survivors had nowhere to go because their homes had been attacked, refused to live with their oppressors, and were still subject to discrimination in their home countries. Many refugees formed Zionist organizations that labored for an independent Jewish nation in Palestine, which was mandated by Britain. In May of 1948, this came to be a reality, and Jews from all over Europe began streaming into Israel. By 1953, almost 170,000 Jewish people had immigrated. This was a major development in immigration and recuperation.

As a direct result of the Holocaust, the Jewish population never reached its former height. The Holocaust caused the world's Jewish population to fall by two-thirds. There was a very steep decrease in the number of Jewish people in the world. In 1939, the international Jewish population was just over 16 million. In 1945, it only reached around 10 million. Europe's Jewish population went from nine and a half million to three and a half million. One study suggests that if the Holocaust had not taken place, the unharmed population would have been 26 million in 1945 and 32 million as of today. It would have doubled if not for the genocide. This physical and quantitative evidence is very impactful because it demonstrates that the Holocaust, to put it simply, killed millions upon millions.

The Holocaust led to numerous programs and establishments which aim to educate people all around the world about what happened. The United Nations Outreach Program, established 15 years ago, reminds the world that learning about the Shoah is a key way to prevent future genocides. In the United States, nearly one-third of all states require Holocaust education, with 16 out of 50 states. It is very important to teach about the evils committed against Jews to make sure the future generations have a grasp of how to prevent more evils. Carolyn Maloney, a Democratic representative of New York, introduced a bill in 2020 to encourage Holocaust education in the US, which was passed. The purpose was to teach that antisemitism and bigotry should not be promoted or accepted. Memorializing the fallen of the Holocaust is another way of preventing antisemitism; there are 59 Holocaust memorials and museums in the U.S. alone. These are all ways in which later generations are taught about the Holocaust.

The Holocaust heavily impacted the lives of millions of people and was a powerful and shocking lesson to the world. What started as brewing antisemitism quickly turned into a genocide through discrimination, torture, and death. The shared idea of antisemitism in that era made it easy for Jews to be persecuted and killed. International Jewry was disrupted when Hitler decided to pit Aryans and Jews against each other. He subsequently banished Jews to concentration camps, where a genocide would be carried out. After the Holocaust, surviving Jews were stranded and had no home to return to. This created many immigration problems, eventually leading to the partial opening of U.S. borders and the establishment of the state of Israel. Nazis were convicted for their war crimes in trials worldwide. Holocaust education is mandatory in many states, which coincides with the many Holocaust memorials and museums placed. The Holocaust taught the world a tremendous lesson of what will happen if one rules with discriminatory powers. The Jewish population never fully recovered from this wicked and impactful blow. The Holocaust had significant effects on the world in the Twentieth Century and today.