The Holocaust, Part One: The Rise of Adolf Hitler and World War II

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National Socialist German Workers' Party members, known as Nazis, salute their leader Adolf Hitler (center) in 1930. Four years later, he became the sole leader of Germany. Photo from: Wikimedia Commons

The first in a two-part series

World War II was the most deadly war in history. It lasted from 1939 to 1945. Millions of people were killed around the world.

In Europe, Jews faced another horror. Jews are people who follow the Jewish religion. Many became victims of the Holocaust. This was the murder of 6 million Jews by the Nazis. The Nazis ruled Germany from 1933 until the end of World War II.

Other people were also caught and killed by the Nazis. People with disabilities were another target. Jews were the Nazis' main victims, though.

Adolf Hitler was the powerful leader of Germany and the Nazis. To him, Jews were a lower race of people. He said Jews were a danger to Germany. In 1933, he became Germany's leader. He began turning his hate into action.
Hitler's rise to power

Anti-Jewish feelings had a long history in Europe. Christians often saw their Jewish neighbors as outsiders. In some places, anti-Jewish feelings turned into hate.

Why Hitler hated Jewish people so much is unclear. He served in the German army in World War I. This war lasted from 1914 to 1918. Germany was defeated in the war. The loss left the country poor and weak. Hitler and people like him wanted someone to blame. They blamed the Jews.

After the war, Hitler joined a small political group. It became known as the Nazi Party. It grew in power under Hitler's leadership. Many Germans were upset about their troubles after World War I. Hitler used their anger. He convinced people to support the Nazis. He promised that if he was given power, he would fix all their problems.

In 1933, Hitler was given a top government post. A year later, he named himself "Führer." This means supreme leader. The Nazis planned giant marches and meetings to show off Hitler's power.

The Nazis attack Jews

In 1933, the Nazis opened a prison camp in Germany. It was near a town called Dachau. Special police hunted down Hitler's enemies. These people were sent to Dachau and other camps.

In 1933, there were more than 500,000 Jews in Germany. The Nazis began bullying them. They forced Jewish workers to quit their jobs. They passed laws to take away their freedom. The bullying grew worse and worse. One night in 1938, Nazi gangs burned Jewish places of worship. They smashed the windows of Jewish-owned shops. It became known as "Kristallnacht." This means "the night of the broken glass."

Between 1933 and 1939, thousands of Jews fled Germany. Those who stayed lived in constant fear.

World War II begins

In September 1939, the German army invaded Poland. It marked the start of World War II. The Nazis rounded up Poland's Jews. They forced them into sections of town behind high walls and barbed wire. The Holocaust was about to begin.