Setting the Scene: Historical Context

The History of Antisemitism

In order to understand the Holocaust, is it helpful to explore the foundations of antisemitism. Antisemitism is the unfounded hatred of Jews because they are Jews. That hatred has had a long history in Europe and beyond. In earlier times, Jews were subject to discrimination and persecution because they refused to accept the religion of the majority. Jews who converted, or so Christians claimed, were no longer considered outsiders; they belonged. In the 1800s, a new form of antisemitism emerged. It was based on the false notion that humans are divided into separate and distinct “races,” and therefore people born as Jews, regardless of their religious beliefs, belonged to an evil and dangerous “race.” Jews were now considered permanent outsiders.

In times of crisis, Jews and other minorities have always been at risk, and the upheavals after World War I and the worldwide depression that began in the 1930s were no exceptions. In such times, many people are attracted to simple answers to complex problems. Those answers often place the blame for the crisis on the “other” in the society. Antisemitism rose in nearly every nation in Europe and the Americas during those crises.

The Rise of Nazi Germany

In Germany, the claim that Jews were responsible for all of the nation’s problems was fostered by groups like Adolf Hitler’s National Socialist, (Nazi) Party. In speech after speech, they insisted that the Jews were everywhere, controlled everything, and acted so secretly that few could detect their influence. The charge was false, but after hearing it again and again, many came to believe it.

"Hiding...where would we hide? In the city? In the country? In a house? In a shack? When, where, how...? These were questions I wasn’t allowed to ask...."

Anne Frank, in a diary entry dated July 8, 1942


The entrance to the secret annex was hidden by this moveable bookcase.
In 1933 the Nazis took control of Germany. Once in power, they destroyed the nation’s democratic institutions and turned Germany into a police state. They were also determined to protect Germans from the nation’s “racial enemies”—the Jews. In just six years, 400 anti-Jewish measures were enacted. Each was designed to protect so-called “Aryan blood” from contamination with so-called “Jewish blood.” Otto Frank was among the first German Jews to understand how dangerous this new government-led antisemitism really was.

Anne Frank and Her Family in Historical Context

In 1933, Otto Frank left Germany and settled in Amsterdam, the capital of the Netherlands—a city with a reputation for religious tolerance. Otto Frank had this reputation in mind when, a year later, he made the decision to move his wife, Edith, and daughters, Margot and Anne, from their home in Frankfurt to Amsterdam. Like many other Jews, Otto Frank believed that by leaving Germany and emigrating to the Netherlands, he would be transporting his family to safety and freedom. Although the Netherlands had its own Nazi Party, they were not yet a danger. So the Franks and other refugees from Germany settled comfortably in their new home.

In Amsterdam, Otto Frank set up a successful company that produced pectin, an ingredient used to make jam. Within a year, the Franks had settled into an apartment, and Margot and Anne were attending school and flourishing in their new home.

Then on September 1, 1939, the Nazis invaded Poland. Two days later, Britain and France declared war on Germany. World War II had officially begun. By 1940, the Germans occupied the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway, Belgium, Luxembourg, and France. In June 1941, they invaded the Soviet Union. By December of 1941, the Germans had also declared war on the United States.

When Germany invaded the Netherlands in 1940, the Frank family once again found itself living under Nazi rule. Over the next two years, Jews were gradually removed from public
life. The first mass arrests took place in February 1941. In one of the first entries in her diary, Anne described the conditions Jews faced in the Netherlands:

Our freedom was severely restricted by a series of anti-Jewish decrees: Jews were required to wear a yellow star; Jews were required to turn in their bicycles; Jews were forbidden to use streetcars; Jews were forbidden to ride in cars, even their own; Jews were required to do their shopping between 3 and 5 p.m.; Jews were required to frequent only Jewish-owned barbershops and beauty parlors; Jews were forbidden to be out on the streets between 8 p.m. and 6 a.m.; Jews were forbidden to go to theaters, movies or any other forms of entertainment; ... Jews were forbidden to visit Christians in their homes; Jews were required to attend Jewish schools, etc. [JUNE 20, 1942]


World War II and the Genocide of the Jews

Before the war began, the Germans had been intent on driving as many Jews as possible out of Germany. By 1939, about half of all German Jews had left the country. Once the war began, emigration was no longer possible and it was then that the Germans turned to murder. In 1940, the first massacres took place in Poland. Einsatzgruppen (mobile killing units) now set out to destroy entire Jewish communities in Eastern Europe. They forced more than 1.5 million Jews from their homes, shot them, and then buried them in mass graves.

By July 1941 Nazi officials were increasingly concerned about the “inefficiencies of these operations” and the psychological burden they placed on the killers. So they devised a more “complete solution of the Jewish question” by creating six death camps in Poland—Chelmno, Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka, Majdanek, and Auschwitz-Birkenau. Of the 6 million Jews killed during the Holocaust, approximately 2.7 million were murdered in the death camps by the time the war ended in 1945.

THE GREATEST ENEMY: Bystanders

The Holocaust survivor Miles Lerman has aptly remarked on the significant role bystanders played in allowing the Holocaust to occur. “A perpetrator is not the most dangerous enemy,” Lerman argues. “The most dangerous part is the bystander because neutrality always helps the killer.”

Marion Pritchard, who rescued Jews in Amsterdam from the Nazis, said in an interview, “[T]here were indeed some people who behaved criminally by betraying their Jewish neighbors and therefore sentencing them to death. There were some people who dedicated themselves to actively rescuing as many people as possible. Somewhere in between was the majority, whose actions varied from the minimum decency of at least keeping quiet if they knew where Jews were hidden to finding a way to help when they were asked.”

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