

Fact Sheet – Phases of the Holocaust

The progression of the Holocaust can be simplified into five broad stages. The first stage, the development of antisemitism, happened well before Hitler came to power. However, it is essential to understand in order to fully contextualise the Holocaust.

Similarly, the final stage, which is still occurring, is not part of the events of World War Two. But the phase of memorialisation is a necessary element in a complete Holocaust education.

Phase One – Before the Holocaust

During the Holocaust, 6 million Jews were murdered because the Nazis believed they were racially inferior, calling them "*Untermenschen*," or subhumans. This idea was not new; it came from a long history of antisemitism in Europe. Hitler and the Nazi Party gained support partly because they tapped into these existing beliefs and biases within German society.¹

Antisemitism is sometimes referred to as 'the oldest hatred', with roots going back to ancient times. There is evidence of antisemitism from Egyptian, Mesopotamian and Greco-Roman societies, mostly arising from rivalries between different religious or cultural groups.

Yet, one of the most important factors in the development of anti-Jewish bigotry was the spread of Christianity. This came with the idea that Judaism had been superseded by Christianity. Antisemitism worsened with the mistaken belief that the Jews were responsible for the death of Jesus.

During the Medieval period, as Christianity spread across Europe, so did negative stereotypes associated with Jews. Jews came to be associated with the Devil, and were even blamed for the spread of the Black Death in the 14th century. Jews were banned from many guilds. Since the Medieval Church forbade Christians from lending money, this became one avenue for Jews to make a living. This resulted in Jews being negatively associated with money – a stereotype that persisted into the modern era.

¹ Robert Gellately: *Backing Hitler – Consent and Coercion in Nazi Germany* (Oxford University Press, 2001), vii.

The long-held phobia of Jews, stretching from ancient times to modern Europe, created the conditions which allowed the Nazi state to sanction the murder of 6 million European Jews.

Phase Two – Legal Persecution

Nazi persecution of Jews began with the imposition of antisemitic laws. These laws worked collectively to make life difficult for Jews, and to exclude them from all aspects of German society.

The two foundational laws were the Nuremberg Race Laws, passed in September 1935.

- The Reich Citizenship Law determined that only people of “German or kindred blood” could be citizens of Germany. A supplementary decree defined Jews as a separate race.
- The Law for the Protection of German Blood and Honour banned marriage between Jews and non-Jewish Germans, and made it a crime for a Jew to have sexual relations with a non-Jew.

Other laws were enacted at all levels of government, ensuring the curtailment of Jewish participation in German life.

To limit Jews’ ability to make a living, laws banned them from owning and running farms, operating retail stores and engaging in a trade. Jews could not work in radio or theatre, or sell artworks. They could not be lawyers or judges, and they could not work in journalism. Jews could not work as auctioneers or midwives, and they were excluded from the civil service. Jewish teachers were banned from public schools. Ultimately, Jewish property was confiscated, including money, jewellery and real estate.

Jews were also excluded from social participation. Laws ensured that Jews could not attend plays or concerts, and they could not go to health spas (the inland equivalent of a day at the beach). Jews could not operate cars, or own radios or telephones. There were also curfews imposed, so that Jews could not leave their homes between specified hours.

In combination, all these laws and others made life extremely difficult for the Jews of Germany and German-occupied Europe. These conditions were exacerbated by increased violence after the November pogrom (sometimes known as Kristallnacht) on the night of 9-10 November, 1938.

Phase Three – Ghettos

From 1939, ghettos were established to segregate and control Jews. Jewish populations were forced to move out of their homes and live within defined districts. Some ghettos were surrounded by walls or fences, others were not, but in all cases, Jewish movement was limited to the confines of the ghetto.

Conditions within the ghettos were extremely difficult. There was very little food, sanitation, or medical care. Overcrowding exacerbated these problems, and diseases such as typhus and tuberculosis were rife. Approximately half a million Jews died in the ghettos of disease and starvation.

Violence was also a constant threat within ghettos, as Jews were subject to the rule of their Nazi guards.

In spite of the harrowing conditions, Jewish cultural life persisted. Jews prayed in secret, and clandestinely observed traditions and celebrations. Jewish troupes presented theatre productions, and artists continued to create. Some ghettos hosted underground libraries, youth groups, and even orchestras, all of which served as a form of resistance against the conditions imposed by Nazi rule.

With the implementation of The Final Solution, ghettos were ‘liquidated’ (emptied out) and Jews were deported to camps.

Phase Four – The Final Solution

Around 1941, Hitler decided to murder the Jews of Europe. Nazi leadership used the euphemism ‘The Final Solution to the Jewish Question’ to refer to the systematic mass murder of Jews.

This was achieved through various means, including mass shootings and murder in purpose-built gas chambers within death camps. The six death camps established by the Nazi regime were Auschwitz-Birkenau, Sobibor, Treblinka, Belzec, Majdanek and Chelmno.

Some Jews were kept alive to work as slave labour. These victims were held in concentration camps, where death rates from starvation, disease, cold and abuse was common.

The Nazis aimed to murder 11 million Jews, and succeeded in murdering 6 million.

Phase Five – Liberation to Memorialisation

In 1944 and 1945, as allied armies moved across Europe, Jewish prisoners were liberated from camps. Starving and sick, many died in the weeks and months following Liberation. Some spent months or years in displaced persons camps, waiting for relocation. Eventually, survivors slowly recovered and rebuilt their lives.

Now, we are in the phase of memorialisation, where we continue learning and teaching about the Holocaust, and the lessons that should never be forgotten. Through the development of museums, and the building of memorials, we continue to remember and honour the 6 million Jews who were murdered.

NEVER AGAIN