PrepUS History

Unit 8 - WWII and Beyond

The Holocaust

During World War II, Hitler and the Nazis set up a program of **genocide**, or the killing of an entire group of people. As many as 6 million Jews were killed in what has become known as the **Holocaust**. The Nazis also targeted other groups that they thought were inferior, such as Slavs and Roma, or Gypsies. Millions of these other groups were also ruthlessly murdered.

No aspect of the Nazi rule was more terrifying than the deliberate attempt to exterminate the Jews. Racial struggle was a key element in Hitler’s world of ideas. He saw it as a clearly defined conflict of opposites. On one side were the Aryans, who were the creators of human cultural development, according to Hitler. On the other side were the Jews, whom Hitler blamed for Germany’s defeat in World War I and the Depression. The Nazis believed that the Jews were a threat to the “racial purity” of the superior German people.

**Nazi Persecution of the Jews**

Beginning in the 1930s, Nazi laws had taken away the personal and political rights of the German Jews. On the night of November 9, 1938, the Nazis burned synagogues, destroyed Jewish shops, and killed many Jews. About 30,000 Jewish men were sent to concentration camps. Because the Nazis had shattered the windows of so many Jewish shops, this event became known as **Kristallnacht**, or the “night of broken glass.”

**The Einsatzgruppen**

A special strike forces, called **Einsatzgruppen**, to carry out Nazi plans. The Nazis began to require all Jews to wear a six-pointed yellow star, known as the **Star of David**, on their clothing. The Einsatzgruppen rounded up all Polish Jews and crowded them into **ghettoes**, areas set aside for them in cities and towns. Conditions in the ghettos were horrible. Families were crowded together in unsanitary housing. The Nazis tried to starve residents by allowing only minimal amounts of food. Eva Galler, who survived the Holocaust, describes life in the ghetto of Lubaczow, a town in Poland:

*“The ghetto was the size of one city block for 7,000 people. We slept 28 people in a room that was 12 by 15 feet. It was like a sardine box. People lived in attics, in basements, in the streets—all over… It was cold. We were not given enough to eat… There was not enough water to drink… Every day a lot of people died.”*

In June 1941, the Einsatzgruppen were given the new job acting as mobile killing units. These death squads followed the regular army’s advance into the Soviet Union. Their job was to round up Jews in their villages, execute them, and to bury them in mass graves.

**The Death Camps**

The Nazis began the mass killing of Jews when the German army invaded the Soviet Union in 1941. Special Nazi forces accompanied the army that specifically sought out Jews.

In January 1942, German leaders agreed on what they called “**the final solution**” to destroy the Jews. The SS (“**Schutz-Staffel**” or security police) had the task of administering the Final Solution. Nazis rounded up millions of Jews and hundreds of thousands of other innocent people in the areas under their control. Crammed into railroad cars like cattle, the prisoners were taken to **death camps**, such as **Auschwitz** in Poland. At the camps, many people were killed in poison gas chambers.

Others were worked to death or died of starvation. Still others were victims of cruel medical experiments performed by Nazi doctors. At war's end, Allied forces moving into Nazi-held areas saw firsthand the unspeakable horrors of the death camps. About two-thirds of Europe's Jewish population perished in the Holocaust.

**The Death Toll**

The Germans killed approximately 6 million Jews, more than 3 million of them in the death camps. Even in concentration camps that were not designed specifically for mass murder, large numbers of inmates were worked to death or subjected to deadly medical experiments. Virtually 90 percent of the Jewish populations of Poland, the Baltic countries, and Germany were killed. Overall, the Holocaust was responsible for the death of nearly two out of every three European Jews.

The Nazis were also responsible for the deliberate death by shooting, starvation, or overwork of as many as another 9 to 10 million non-Jewish people. The Nazis considered the Roma, who are sometimes known as Gypsies, to be an alien race. About 40 percent of Europe’s Roma were killed in the death camps.

The leading citizens of the Slavic peoples were arrested and killed. Probably an additional 4 million Poles, Ukrainians, and Belorussians lost their lives as slave laborers. Finally, at least 3 to 4 million Soviet prisoners of war were killed.

This mass slaughter of European Jews is known as **Shoah**—a Hebrew word meaning “total destruction.” Many Jews attempted to resist the Nazis. Friends and strangers aided some Jews, hiding them or smuggling them to safe areas. A few foreign diplomats saved Jews by issuing exit visas. The nation of Denmark saved almost its entire Jewish population.

Some people did not believe the accounts of death camps because, during World War I, allies had greatly exaggerated German atrocities to arouse enthusiasm for the war. Most often, people pretended not to notice what was happening. Even worse, collaborators helped the Nazis hunt down Jews. Although the Allies were aware of the concentration camps and death camps, they chose to concentrate on ending the war. Not until after the war did the full extent of the horror and inhumanity of the Holocaust impress itself upon people’s consciousness.

The Holocaust had an impact on the world after World War II. The consequences of Nazi brutality made people aware of the importance of defending human rights and combating prejudice. Governments and international organizations also began to work to prevent and punish the crime of genocide. The inability of Jews to find shelter from Nazi terror increased demands that the Jews have their own country in Palestine. Christians and Jews began to move toward greater understanding and cooperation.

Answer the following questions with correct spelling and grammar in complete sentences.

1. What is the definition of the Holocaust?

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2. What was the “Night of Broken Glass” called in German, and what happened?

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3. What was the Einsatzgruppen, and what was their job?

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4. What is the difference between a concentration camp (where we put Japanese-Americans during WWII) and a death camp (where the Nazis put the Jews during WWII)?

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5. How many Jews did the Nazis kill? What does the word “Shoah” mean? Do you think it properly describes this situation? Why or why not?

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6. Although the destruction of the Jews occurred mainly in Europe, why do you think the Holocaust is known as a worldwide human rights issue?

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