

Pre-Reading Preparation

Historical Background—Hitler and Other Important Persons of the Holocaust

Adolf Hitler - Adolf Hitler, founder and leader of the Nazi Party, Reich Chancellor and leader of the Third Reich from 1933 to 1945, was also Head of State and Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces.

In his book, *Mein Kampf* (1925), Hitler was able to publicize his belief that the German people, whom he thought of as racially superior, were threatened by liberalism, Marxism, and Bolshevism, which he felt were directed from behind the scenes by the Jews, blaming them for all of Germany's domestic problems. His book became the ideological basis for the Nazi Party's racist beliefs and murderous practices.

With the onset of the Great Depression (1929) the middle classes in German society felt the devastating effects of mass unemployment and social dissolution, which helped Hitler to win over all those who felt their economic existence was threatened. A highly skilled orator, Hitler spoke at a number of mass rallies, playing on the people's desire for strong leadership, and was able to present himself as Germany's redeemer. An ideal environment in which to deliver propaganda, these meetings created a sense of community and strength, kept emotional levels high, and were the perfect platform for generating a feeling of national unity. Hitler's propaganda would convince the German people that the Jews were a race whose goal was world domination, and therefore the Jews were a direct threat to the German people. They believed that the Aryan race should triumph, and therefore it was their duty to eliminate the Jews.

Hitler's ultimate goal in launching World War II was to establish an Aryan empire to include all of Europe and the Soviet Union. He believed that this land was the natural territory to which the German people were rightly entitled, and sought to overtake these lands in order to preserve the dominance of the Aryan race.

Adolf Eichmann - Adolf Eichmann was instrumental in the implementation of the "Final Solution." Although he visited Palestine in 1937 to explore the possibility of emigration of the Jews from Nazi Germany to Palestine, he mainly worked behind the scenes. His "resettlement" department soon began to create death camps, make improvements to the techniques used to gas their victims, and develop a system of transportation that would take the Jews and other victims to their death. By August, 1944, he was able to report to Himmler that approximately six million Jews had been murdered in the death camps.

Heinrich Himmler - Heinrich Himmler, best known as organizer of the mass murder of the Jews, was Reichsführer of the SS, head of the Gestapo and the Waffen-SS, and Minister of the Interior. He became head of the *Schutzstaffel* (SS) when it was a small group of only 200 men, but under his leadership, it grew substantially to become a body of over 50,000. He was instrumental in setting up the first concentration camp, Dachau, and in creating new guidelines for qualifications for internment there and at the other camps. After witnessing the extermination of a hundred Jews, a demonstration set up for his benefit, he ordered the use of poison gas as a "more humane means" of execution. Himmler also introduced the principle of racial selection in order to ensure a society populated with people of "high value." He was especially pleased with *Lebensborn*, which he established as a place where girls and women selected for their "perfect Nordic traits" could procreate with SS men, thereby creating a race of "supermen."

Rudolf Franz Höss - (not to be confused with Rudolf Hess, Hitler's deputy) - Rudolf Höss, Kommandant of Auschwitz under the direct command of Heinrich Himmler, oversaw the conversion of Auschwitz into an extermination camp, installing gas chambers and crematoria to carry out the "Final Solution" of the Jewish question. He found that carbon monoxide, which had previously been used in exterminations, was inefficient, and introduced Zyklon B as an alternative. Daily, he watched as prisoners were beaten, tortured, gassed, and burned in the crematoria. His matter-of-fact attitude about what happened there was well-known to his peers.

Joseph Goebbels - Joseph Goebbels found his place in the Nazi Party as Hitler's Propaganda Leader, selling Hitler to the German public. He was instrumental in creating the image of Hitler as the savior of the German people from fear and resentment, financial disaster, and the ultimate "enemy"—the Jews. His own hatred of the Jews enabled him to develop a strategy to mobilize the masses against them, based on the need to establish a common enemy. He was able, through manipulation, to induce the public to give themselves over to Hitler. Goebbels's lust for power, coupled with his deeply rooted contempt for humanity and Jews in particular, and his expertise in the field of mass persuasion, enabled him to gain control of the media – i.e. the press, publishing, radio, and movies. An organizer of *Kristallnacht* (Night of the Broken Glass), he personally supervised the deportation of the Jews from Berlin in 1942.

Hermann Göring - Hermann Göring (Goering, in English) held the rank of *Reichsmarschall*, the highest military rank of the Greater German Reich. *Reichsmarschall* was a special rank intended for Göring, which made him senior to all Army and Air Force Field Marshals. Göring was the highest figure in the Nazi Hierarchy who had authorized the "Final Solution" of the Jewish question. Göring was almost always the moving force, second only to *Der Führer*. He was the leading war aggressor, director of the slave labor program, and the creator of the oppressive program against the Jews and other races. Near the end of the war, Göring proposed that he take over leadership of the *Reich* as Hitler's designated successor. Hitler had Göring arrested for high treason, dismissed him from all his offices, and subsequently expelled him from the party.

Dr. Josef Mengele - Dr. Josef Mengele, commonly referred to as the "Angel of Death," was known for his role as the "selector" on the platform at Auschwitz. At his discretion, prisoners went either to the gas chambers or to the camp. More importantly, Mengele was known for his "scientific" experimentation on twins at Auschwitz. There, one twin could serve as a control, while the other was used in his experiments on genetic abnormalities, which involved such atrocities as freezing people to death, sewing two people together, starving a pregnant woman to see how long it would take for her baby to die, and more.

Reinhard Heydrich - Reinhard Heydrich, one of the most heinous war criminals of the Holocaust, stood out as one of the cruelest and most brutal mass murderers in Nazi Germany. Heydrich, known as "The Hangman," murdered thousands of Jews and other "enemies" of the Reich. He was instrumental in creating the SD, a Nazi intelligence agency that watched for dissent within the party and created files on all the Jews in Germany. By 1934, Heydrich ran the Gestapo, the German Security Police. Although Göring told Heydrich to solve the "Jewish problem" by emigration and evacuation, Heydrich decided that emigration alone could not take care of all the Jews, and that the "Final Solution" was the only answer. A part of the "Final Solution" from the beginning when Himmler assigned the job of mass murder to the *Einsatzgruppen*, the killing squads of the security police, Heydrich forbade emigration of Jews from France and Belgium. As extermination camps were built in Poland, Heydrich coordinated the deportation of the Jews to these camps. Heydrich was assassinated in 1942.

Nazis (National Socialist German Workers' Party) – The "Final Solution" was carried out by the leaders of the Nazi Party, the SS, hundreds of thousands of members of the Gestapo, the *Einsatzgruppen* and the police and armed forces. Without the German soldiers (commonly referred to as SS) the camps could not have functioned. Organized into units of one hundred, the soldiers were each equipped with a machine gun in case of resistance. The entire camp could be covered from above with three towers, operating day and night. If anyone stepped into a forbidden area, made an attempt to flee, behaved defiantly, or simply irritated an SS guard, he or she would be shot.