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Lesson 6

The Holocaust

The Jewish people have a unique situation where being Jewish can be both considered a religion and a race, but the heritage, faith, and beliefs of these people have been the scapegoat or target of many a vicious attacks as far back as biblical recounting from Egypt where they were claimed to be enslaved in mass before being saved by God to persecution under Roman rule and all the way into the relatively recent past of Nazi Germany where and when the Holocaust occurred, which was the single worst accurately recorded instance purposeful hate, attacks, and flat out genocide against the Jewish people. The Holocaust, dubbed the “Final Solution”, was Hitler’s plan for the mass extinction and genocide of the Jewish people.

For much of recorded history the Jewish people where easy targets of persecution because they conformed to their Jewish traditions and customs rather than customs and beliefs of the empire, kingdom, or even city they resided in. This noticeable difference and lack of assimilation led many to become enraged or fearful of the Jewish people. Centuries past before someone coined a phrase to describe this kind of overt and encompassing hatred of the Jewish people, in 1879, William Marr came up with the word “anti-Semitism” to describe just this. The peak of this “anti-Semitism” is often and should be Nazi Germany in the 1930s and 40s where Adolf Hitler took “anti-Semitism” to a new level by claiming the Jewish shouldn’t be hated just because of their faith or customs, but because they were an inferior race of people. He proceeded to blame many of the nation’s problems on the Jews, using them as scapegoat. Adolf Hitler’s plan for dehumanizing and eventual extermination began by forcing Jewish people to mark their faith by displaying a physical symbol that identified them as Jewish. Just two years late, in 1935, the Nuremberg Racial laws were signed and put into law which banned contact between Jewish people and Hitler’s “Master Race” or the Aryans. These laws were the beginning of the end of any relative normalcy in Germany for the Jewish people.

Germans had always had a difficult time with war reparations and being blamed for World War 1, but as Nazi propaganda began to take hold the approval of the Jewish people slid with the economy because it was easier to blame the Jews than themselves, other nations, or politics since they were sometimes right next door. So once Hitler began rounding up the Jews and placing them in ghettos, most people did not care. These ghettos were restricted areas where Jews had to be and could not leave. The living conditions were dirty and cramped, most buildings had no power, water, or plumbing. The worst of these ghettos was the Warsaw Ghetto where historians estimate that nearly 70,000 people died from the horrid conditions inside this ghetto, between the lack of food or medicine many succumbed to disease, starvation, or the elements.

Finally, with the Jews “Out of sight out of mind” of the German people, Hitler could finish his final solution. In 1941 the ghettos were emptied, and the Jewish people were stuffed into train cars like cattle and shipped across country for up to days at a time, the ones unlucky enough to survive were split on arrival between concentration labor camps or extermination camps. Both options were horrific in their own way, the concentration camp was a slave labor camp where the prisoners were forced to do hard labor with very little food or water and generally the only escape was death, however prolonged the life span of victims of concentration camps the torture was arguably worse than the life extended. On the other hand other victims were taken to extermination camps where they were immediately murdered, often times the victims of the extermination camps were children, elderly, disabled, and the sick or injured. In classic German fashion these camps were turned into efficient murder factories killing up to as many as 9000 people a day. This mass murder and efficiency at which it was like nothing the world had ever seen and the Jewish people were in its sights.

Adolf Hitler’s “Final Solution” systematically eradicated 6 million Jewish people in the name of racial purity of Germany and the historical persecution of the heritage, faith, and beliefs of these people made Hitler’s plan easier and more accepted the German people. The Jewish people have been the scapegoat for anti-Semitic behavior for much of their history, but all fail to compare to the horror which was curse upon them by Hitler’s Germany and his Final Solution.