

# WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT THE HOLOCAUST?

## 10 COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS

### 1. At the beginning of 1933, what percent of the German population was Jewish?

Misconception: *Jews made up a significant proportion of Germany society and they controlled the economies of Germany, all of Europe, and America.* Not true. According to the census in June 1933, Jews represented less than 1% of the German population, approximately 500,000 people (USHMM, 2010). In the 1920s, non-Jews controlled the major corporations across Europe and the United States. While there were affluent Jews in Europe and the U.S., a great number of Jews lived in poverty. The Nazis used propaganda to spread the myth that Jewish people were responsible for Germany's defeat in WWI, as well as the myth that all Jews were rich and controlled the economy. This myth prevails today.

### 2. What percentage of the German vote did Hitler receive in the election of March 1933?

Misconception: *Hitler was elected and the National Socialist German Workers' Party (Nazi Party) received more than 50% of the vote.* Not true. By the end of 1932, the Nazis were the largest party in the German parliament (Reichstag), and the Nazis formed a coalition government with the conservative German Nationalists in 1933. The Nazis had three members of the cabinet, and the conservatives had nine. In January 1933, Adolf Hitler was appointed chancellor by President von Hindenburg; Hitler was not elected. In the last relatively free election in March of 1933, the Nazi Party received 44% of the vote (USHMM, 2010).

### 3. Complete the first line of the poem by Martin Niemöller: "First they came for the \_\_\_\_\_"

Misconception: *The Nazis persecuted Jews before any other group.* Not true. When the Nazis came to power in 1933, they immediately targeted their political opponents. Within weeks, the Nazis opened Dachau concentration camp and incarcerated there many Communists and other political opponents and dissidents. While many groups were certainly persecuted immediately in many ways, the Nuremberg Laws, designed to discriminate against people of Jewish descent – and also used against people of Roma (Gypsy) or African descent – were created and implemented from 1935 onwards. Reflecting on the Nazis' policies of persecution, Protestant Pastor Martin Niemöller, who was a public critic of the Nazi regime and spent many years in Nazi concentration camps, wrote: *First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out – Because I was not a Socialist. Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out – Because I was not a Trade Unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out – Because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me – and there was no one left to speak for me* (USHMM, 2010).

### 4. How did Anne Frank die?

Misconception: *Most of the Nazis' Jewish victims were murdered in the gas chambers.* Not true. Anne Frank was arrested and deported to Auschwitz and, later, to the Nazi concentration camp at Bergen-Belsen in Germany where she and her sister, Margot, died of disease, most likely typhus (USHMM, 2020). The Nazis' intentional neglect of their ghetto and camp prisoners, leading to starvation and disease, are methods of Nazi murder often overlooked. Also often overlooked are the Nazis' mass shooting operations, particularly in Eastern Europe where the Nazis' Einsatzgruppen (mobile killing squads) shot more than one million Jewish people into mass graves (USHMM, 2020).

### 5. Why did the Nazis target Jehovah's Witnesses?

Misconception: *The Nazis targeted everyone for the same reasons.* Not true. The Nazis targeted different groups for different reasons. The Nazis targeted Roma, Sinti, and other tribes (Gypsies), Jews, Africans, Poles, Slavs, Soviet Prisoners of War, and so-called Asiatic peoples of the Soviet Union because they perceived them to be racially inferior. The Nazis targeted homosexuals, the mentally and physically disabled (including children and adults with severe physical defects, people with mental retardation, people with hereditary deafness, hereditary blindness, schizophrenia, epilepsy, so-called manic-depressive disorder, or other real and perceived disabilities), prostitutes, homeless people, and lesbians, because the Nazis perceived them as biological and social threats to German society. The Nazis targeted dissenting Catholic and Lutheran Clergy, Communists, Socialists, Social Democrats, political dissidents, dissenting intellectuals, Freemasons, trade unionists, and pacifists, because they perceived them as a threat to Nazi ideology. "The Nazis targeted Jehovah's Witnesses because they were unwilling to accept the authority of the state, because of their international connections, and because they were strongly opposed to both war on behalf of a temporal authority and organized government in matters of conscience." The Nazis murdered some geriatrics, bombing victims, and injured German soldiers because they saw them to be "useless eaters" and a drain on society (USHMM, 2010).

### 6. What percentage of African Germans did the Nazis forcibly sterilize?

Misconception: *European Jews suffered more than any other victim group.* Not true. It is impossible to compare the suffering of one group with the suffering of another. Holocaust scholars warn against making comparisons of pain and setting up destructive hierarchies of suffering (USHMM, 2010). But we can compare the experiences of different groups and we can compare the Nazis' different policies and actions against each group. By doing so, we find that different groups suffered in different ways

and that each group's collective suffering was unique and devastating in its own way. For example, the Nazis targeted German people of part-African descent, hunting them down for systematic sterilization. According to historians, by 1937, the Nazis had sterilized most of the 385 Germans that had been registered as being of part-African descent (Bergen, 2003), effectively cutting off their lineage.

### **7. What was the most popular kind of music enjoyed in the Warsaw Ghetto?**

Misconception: *The Jewish people of Europe were all religious and old-fashioned.* Not true. Many people assume that the Jews of Europe before the Holocaust were all observant, religious, old-fashioned Jews. This is not true. Many people the Nazis targeted as Jews were assimilated, secular, or even did not identify as Jewish. The question about the music in the ghettos often reveals this misconception, as many people assume that the most popular music at this time included Yiddish folk music and Hebrew songs. According to historians, secular, modern music such as the Tango was considered most popular (ILHMEC, 2008).

### **8. Whom did the Nazis identify for complete annihilation?**

Misconception: *The Jews were the only group of people that the Nazis targeted for complete annihilation.* Not true. The Nazis sought to murder people across Europe of Jewish descent, people across Europe of Roma and Sinti descent and other tribes (Gypsies), and mentally and physically handicapped Germans and Austrians (and in some other parts of Europe), and to sterilize all Germans of part-African descent. Misconception: *The Nazis attempted to annihilate every one of their victim groups.* Not true. The Nazis targeted some groups for incarceration or other "treatments." For example, suspecting homosexuality could be "cured," the Nazis targeted homosexuals for "reeducation." The Nazi regime – and in some cases its collaborators – systematically targeted, sterilized, incarcerated, tortured, raped, subjected to pseudo-medical experimentation, and/or murdered the following groups of people: people of African descent; alcoholics; people of so-called Asiatic descent; dissenting clergy (Catholic, Lutheran and others); criminals and perceived criminals; Communists, Socialists, Social Democrats, and political dissidents; people with mental and physical disabilities (including children and adults with severe physical defects, people with mental retardation, people with hereditary deafness, hereditary blindness, schizophrenia, epilepsy, so-called manic-depressive disorder, or other real and perceived disabilities); emigrants and foreign forced laborers; Freemasons; the homeless; intellectuals; Jehovah's Witnesses; people of Jewish descent; lesbians and male homosexuals (and perceived homosexuals); pacifists; people of Polish descent; prostitutes; people of Sinti or Roma descent, as well as other so-called "Gypsies"; people of Slavic descent; Soviet prisoners of war; trade unionists; women; and so-called "useless eaters," including some geriatrics, bombing victims, and injured German soldiers (USHMM, 2010). Some scholars add women and children to this list as separate categories, as the Nazis often developed and implemented specific policies against women and children.

### **9. Approximately how many Nazi officers were shot for refusing to take part in mass-murder?**

Misconception: *Nazi officers were shot or punished for refusing to take part in mass-murder.* Not true. There is no evidence that Nazis were punished for refusing to take part in mass-murder. It is known that those who did not want to be involved directly in mass-murder were assigned other positions (ILHMEC, 2008). Misconception: *All Germans were Nazis and perpetrators of the Holocaust.* Not true. Some Germans resisted the Nazis. The Nazis expelled 10,000 German Christians who were anti-Hitler and sent thousands of anti-Nazi Germans to concentration camps. The Nazis found many collaborators – French, Hungarian, Romanian, Ukrainian, Latvians, Lithuanians, and members of other nations – that helped them carry out the Holocaust. One of the most famous anti-Nazi groups was "The White Rose," a group of students and faculty at the University of Munich who tried to publicize Nazi atrocities. The Nazis executed them in 1943 (ILHMEC, 2008). At the same time, a huge proportion of the German population agreed with and allowed itself to be indoctrinated by the Nazi regime.

### **10. Which country was the first to forcibly sterilize people with disabilities?**

Misconception: *The eugenics movement for racial science originated and ended with Nazism.* Not true. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the English mathematician Francis Galton (a cousin of scientist Charles Darwin) coined the term "eugenics" (meaning "noble heredity") and promoted theories of racial science and ideas about human superiority and inferiority (Facing History & Ourselves, 2020). By the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, politicians, doctors, scientists, and community leaders in Great Britain, in the United States, and in other countries passed laws and implemented policies with the goal of removing particular kinds of people from society, namely people with real and perceived disabilities and those considered to be racially inferior. Inspired by British and American eugenicists, Adolf Hitler and the Nazi leadership infused Nazi ideology with theories of racial science, paving the way for genocide. The eugenics movements predated and outlasted the Nazi era. In the United States, over many decades, state governments oversaw the forcible sterilization of thousands of people deemed unworthy of procreation with a focus on people with mental disabilities and indigenous, African American, and Latina women. Forcible sterilizations in the U.S. continued into the late 1970s. In Canada, forcible sterilizations of indigenous women continued into the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century.