

CONTEXT OF THE DIARY OF ANNE FRANK

Anne Frank's life (1929-45) spanned the most critical years in the history of the Third Reich and the Holocaust. Born in the waning years of the democratic Weimar Republic, Anne Frank was only four years old when Hitler and the Nazi Party ascended to power. The Weimar Republic, established after Germany's defeat in World War I, had failed to garner widespread support. Unemployment, inflation, labour unrest, and rising violence in the streets were all associated in the popular mind with the inability and inefficiency of the Weimar politicians. Extremist parties, which put forth promises of a better future, gained popularity.

The National Socialist German Workers' (Nazi) Party, founded in 1919, was among those benefitting from the unsettled political and economic times. Its programs promised to restore honour and greatness to Germany. To accomplish these goals, the Nazis advocated a Germany free of Jews and other groups who endangered the destiny of the Third Reich. In 1933

Adolf Hitler, the leader of the Nazi Party, was appointed Chancellor of Germany. As soon as the Nazis were in power, Jews, a very small minority in Germany, were subjected to arbitrary arrests and attacks in the streets. Humiliation of Jews in their synagogues, an economic boycott of Jewish businesses in April 1933, and the firing of Jewish civil servants (this includes university professors, teachers, and others holding government positions) further demonstrated the hostile environment.

Jews who stayed in Germany witnessed a gradual progression of anti-Semitic measures. While there was sporadic terror against Jews in 1933, by 1935 the Nuremberg Laws determined who the Jews were, legalizing their inferiority and their stateless status. Hundreds of pieces of anti-Semitic legislation became law in the middle and late 1930's, segregating Jews from all aspects of German life.

In 1938, as the Third Reich expanded to incorporate Austria and parts of Czechoslovakia, the Nazis escalated their campaign against the Jews. A world conference at Evian, France, with representatives from thirty-two nations, failed to offer any help or haven for the Jews of Germany and Austria. On November 9 and 10, 1938, a nationwide pogrom, later known as Kristallnacht (Night of the Broken Glass) resulted in massive destruction of Jewish property and synagogues. Thirty thousand Jewish men and boys were arrested and deported to concentration camps.

On the eve of the war Hitler ordered the killing of German institutionalized disabled patients, calling them "useless eaters." The program, named T-4, transferred the victims to six institutions in Germany and Austria, some equipped with special gas chambers.

WORLD WAR II

The German surprise invasion of Poland in September 1939 began World War II and greatly expanded the Third Reich. Countries in Eastern and Western Europe were rapidly invaded. By 1940 Denmark, Norway, Belgium, Luxembourg, and France were controlled by the Nazis, who established puppet governments, ghettos, transit camps, and forced-labour camps, in addition to the concentration camps. The Nazis rounded up and deported massive numbers

of prisoners, putting them into hundreds of new camps filled with political opponents, resistance fighters, Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, and other victims of the Nazi policies.

The German invasion and conquest of the Netherlands began on May 10, 1940, and ended on May 14, after the destruction of Rotterdam. Throughout most of Nazi-occupied Europe the Nazis now expanded their program to make Europe judenrein, or "Jew-free," an idea that had been introduced in the 1930's. However, during the war years anti-Semitic legislation and physical violence against Jews intensified. In the Netherlands, they were registered, isolated, and removed from public life; their businesses were aryanised within eighteen months.

The year 1941 marked a turning point in the course of the war. The German Army invaded the Soviet Union, thereby increasing by 3 million the number of Jews under their domination. Mobile killing squads called Einsatzgruppen followed the German army throughout the conquered territories, where they rounded up people, forced them to undress in front of mass graves, and shot them in masses.

In the summer and fall of 1941, the Nazi hierarchy decided to move to the next stage of their policy regarding Jews. This led to the period of systematic mass murder in death camps, beginning in late 1941, which the Nazis referred to in their code words "The Final Solution of the Jewish Question." The six killing sites, close to rail lines in various areas of Poland, were at Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka, Chelmo, Majdanek, and Auschwitz-Birkenau.

The purpose of the death camps was mainly to kill Jews, but there were many other victims as well. Majdanek and Auschwitz-Birkenau were special cases, having both labour facilities and killing centres. Other camps such as Bergen-Belsen became places of death for thousands of victims through starvation and disease. In addition to these camps, the Nazis continued to expand the slave-labour-camp system to thousands throughout the Third Reich. Here prisoners were literally worked until they were no longer useful to the Nazis, then put to death.

There were, however, people throughout the time of the Third Reich who found the courage to help others. Like the Franks' helpers, many risked their lives to hide Jews and others from the Nazis. Organized resistance to the Nazis was punishable by death, but despite this, there were armed revolts by Jews in the death camps of Treblinka, Sobibor, and Auschwitz. The uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto held off German soldiers from April to May of 1943.

THE HOLOCAUST IN THE NETHERLANDS

In the Netherlands the first mass arrests of Jews began in February 1941. The Nazis began Rassen, or roundups: Jewish men and boys were grabbed from their homes, beaten, and deported. In June 1941 the Dutch people of Amsterdam protested in a two-day strike which Nazi troops quickly put down.

In the first months that the Frank family lived in the Secret Annex, the death camps in Poland were operating at full capacity. Anne sensed the danger for Jews, although she was not aware of the full magnitude of mass murder occurring hundreds of miles to the east. As she remarked in her diary on November 19, 1942:

In the evening when it's dark, I often see long lines of good, innocent people accompanied by crying children, walking on and on, ordered about by a handful of men who bully and beat them until they nearly drop. No one is spared. The sick, the elderly, children, babies, and pregnant women - all are marched to their death.

Listening to the news of the war on the radio was extremely important to the inhabitants of the Annex. Only Germany's defeat would end the mass killing of Jews and other innocent victims. During 1943 and 1944, reports of Germany's military reversals provided the Annex residents with hope for the future.

News of events such as the halting of German troops in the Soviet Union in February 1943, as well as the Allied invasion of Sicily and Italy's mainland beginning the following July, prompted Anne to write optimistically about the approaching end of the war. Nevertheless, she was saddened to realize that the declining military situation for Germany did not mitigate the war against the Jews. She especially despaired over the massive arrests and deportation of Hungarian Jews in May and June 1944. Although D-Day operations elated Anne and the others in the Annex, the war still dragged on, leaving them wondering when it would ever end.

On July 15, 1944, Anne expressed her sense of foreboding:

It's utterly impossible for me to build my life on a foundation of chaos, suffering and death. I see the world being slowly transformed into a wilderness, I hear the approaching thunder that, one day, will destroy us too. I feel the suffering of millions.

And yet, when I look up at the sky, I somehow feel that everything will change for the better that this cruelty too shall end, that peace and tranquillity will return once more. In the meantime, I must hold on to my ideals. Perhaps the day will come when I'll be able to realize them!

THE END OF THE WAR

The arrests of the residents of the Secret Annex on August 4, 1944, and their subsequent deportation from Westerbork to Auschwitz took place during the months that the Germans were facing defeat. Soviet troops already entered the Majdanek death camp in Lublin and publicized the horrors they found.

As the Allies reached the occupied countries, the Nazis began to cover up the evidence of genocide and forced prisoners to march on foot toward central Germany to prevent their liberation. Many inmates died or were killed if they could not walk. During the final days, in the spring of 1945, conditions at the remaining camps were so inhumane that many more died. Concentration camps such as Bergen-Belsen became a death trap for thousands, including Anne and Margot Frank. On November 24, 1944, SS leader Heinrich Himmler ordered the destruction of Auschwitz's crematoria and the removal of as many prisoners as possible as the Russians approached the camp.

The loss of Jewish lives in the Netherlands alone illustrates the magnitude of mass murder that occurred during the Holocaust. By July 1944 the country was virtually judenrein. In 1940

approximately 140,000 Jews lived in the Netherlands (during the Nazi occupation). After liberation, just over 5,000 were still alive.

By May 1945 Nazi Germany collapsed and the war was over in Europe. The SS guards fled the concentration, forced-labour, and death camps. The camps were liberated and the world began to realize the horrors of the Holocaust.

THE AFTERMATH

After the war the world tried to grapple with what had happened and work to prevent its recurrence. As Otto Frank prepared Anne's diary for publication, the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg sought to prosecute some of the Nazi leaders and to document their crimes as a warning for the future. Judges from the Allied Powers, including Great Britain, France, the United States, and the Soviet Union, heard evidence against twenty-two Nazi criminals for "crimes against peace" and "war crimes," which violated the laws and customs of warfare, and "crimes against humanity." Fourteen high-ranking Nazis were sentenced to death; others were sent to prison. Most of those prosecuted admitted that they were guilty of the crimes of which they were accused. Their defence? That they were simply following orders of a higher established power.

The Nazis' leader, Adolf Hitler, was not present at the Nuremberg Trials. He and several of his aides had committed suicide in the final days of the war. Subsequent trials have continued to this day. In the United States, where many war criminals escaped, the government deports those who participated in the persecution during the Nazi regime and came to the country illegally. The Nuremberg trials revealed fully what can happen when a state decides to dehumanize its citizens. The hope was to seek justice against those who participated in the murder of millions, including Anne Frank, simply because they were Jewish.