



Student Handout: Historical Context

Antisemitism had existed in Europe long before Hitler's rise to power in Germany in 1933. Throughout the late 1800s and early 1920s, there were waves of mass emigration of Jews fleeing antisemitic legislation and violence in Europe. Approximately 2 to 3 million Jews, primarily from Eastern Europe immigrated to the U.S. between 1881 and 1924, fleeing pogroms and other forms of persecution.

In the early 1930s there were roughly 523,000 Jews in Germany, representing less than 1% of the population. The majority of the German Jewish community were assimilated and most lived in cities, with the highest Jewish population residing in Berlin. When the Nazis came to power in 1933, fears of antisemitic legislation and violence resulted in over 37,000 Jews immediately fleeing Germany to neighboring countries, such as France, Belgium, Denmark, Switzerland, and the Netherlands. However, strict immigration restrictions made it increasingly challenging for immigrants to get to places like the U.S. and Great Britain.

As the 1930s wore on, Jewish people found life increasingly difficult. In 1935, the Nuremberg Race Laws stripped Jewish people of citizenship and narrowed the definition of a German citizen to Aryans, excluding Jewish people, Roma, and Black people from German society. In 1938 and 1939 there was a rise in migration, brought on first by Germany's annexation of Austria in March, and then the Kristallnacht pogrom in November. Kristallnacht was a nationwide night of pogrom targeting Jewish synagogues, businesses, homes, and people.

As the Nazi threat widened in Europe it had caused an immense refugee crisis. Jewish people and others targeted by the Nazi regime, including political and intellectual opponents, were all at risk of persecution, violence and death. U.S. President Roosevelt brought together leaders from 32 countries in Evian, France to discuss the crisis. Delegates from the U.S., Great Britain, France, Canada and Australia discussed the ongoing crisis, however with little interest in taking in more refugees, the Evian Conference ended without any real solution.

With the start of WWII in 1939, Germany began to expand its territorial holdings in Europe, further propelling the refugee crises in Western and Central Europe. In total, between 180,000 and 220,000 European refugees immigrated to the United States during the Holocaust (1933-1945) with the overwhelming majority arriving before 1942. Many more people tried to escape from Nazi occupied Europe, but ultimately became victims of the Holocaust and atrocities of WWII.

In 1933, approximately 9.5 million Jews lived in Europe but by the end of WWII, two-third of Europe's Jewish population perished.

When WWII ended in 1945, roughly 11 million people remained uprooted and displaced throughout Europe. This included people who had been forced laborers, Jewish and non-Jewish survivors of concentration camps, former prisoners-of-war (POWs), and people who had fled to western Europe to escape the USSR (LINK). Many displaced people did not or could not return to their homes across Europe as their communities had been decimated and their possessions had been taken by the Nazi regime and the members of the public. Rampant antisemitism still existed throughout Europe and there were violent pogroms against Jewish people who attempted to return home. As a temporary solution, Displaced Persons' Camps (DP Camps) were set up in Germany, Austria, and Italy to hold the roughly 250,000 Jewish DPs. As this was meant to be temporary, the Allied powers had to quickly figure out how to support this massive number of people seeking new homes and safety. Some DPs found their way to other countries



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soon after the Holocaust, relying on family members who lived in places like the United States and Canada. The U.S. Congress passed the Displaced Persons Act of 1948, providing approximately 400,000 US immigration visas for displaced persons between 1949 and 1952.

By 1952 there were over 80,000 Jewish DPs in the United States, about 136,000 in Israel, and another 20,000 in other nations, including Canada and South Africa. With this wave of emigration, the DP emigration crisis came to an end and DPs camps across Europe closed.