

# BBC Bitesize GCSE History - 20th century Germany

## Episode 8 – The Holocaust

**Announcer:** BBC Sounds, music, radio, podcasts.

**Katie:** I'm Katie Charlwood.

**Datshiane:** And I'm Datshiane Navanayagam.

**Katie:** And this is Bitesize GCSE History.

**Datshiane:** Before we begin today's episode, we wanted to let you know that we will be discussing the Holocaust, one of the darkest periods in human history. This topic involves deeply distressing themes, and the suffering of millions of innocent people. Whilst it's crucial to learn about this period to understand the impact of hatred and intolerance, some of the content may be upsetting or difficult to hear.

**Katie:** And if at any point you feel overwhelmed, please take a break or speak to someone you trust. Remember it's okay to feel emotional about these events, and it's important to approach this subject with respect and care.

**Datshiane:** In the previous episode, we examined Nazi persecution against Jewish people between 1933 when Hitler gained total power, up until the beginning of the war in 1939. And in this episode we'll continue this timeline of persecution towards the horrors of the Holocaust: the murder of approximately six million Jewish men, women and children by Nazi Germany and its collaborators during World War II.

**Datshiane:** Okay, Katie, Germany 1939. Hitler and the Nazis have been in total control of Germany since 1933, and life for Jewish people has become intolerable.

**Katie:** In March 1939, Germany invaded Czechoslovakia, and on the 1st of September the Second World War broke out when Germany invaded Poland. The persecution of Jewish people intensified not just in Germany but now in countries occupied by the Nazis.

**Datshiane:** Helga Weiss was a nine-year-old Jewish schoolgirl. When the Nazis invaded Prague in Czechoslovakia, in her diary entry of March 1939, she wrote, worryingly: "Anti-Jewish orders are on the rise. The news that Jews couldn't be employed in government jobs any more caused an uproar in Jewish families. Then, no Aryan, previously an unfamiliar word, could employ a non-Aryan Jew. Now they keep coming time and time again, order after order, you barely know what you can and can't do. It is forbidden to visit cafés, cinemas, theatres, playgrounds, parks - there are so many things that I can't remember them all. Among others, there was also an order that really upset me, the expulsion of Jewish children from state schools. When I found out I was unhappy. After the holidays I was supposed to go into Year Five. I like school and the thought that I will never be able to sit at a school desk with other students brings tears to my eyes. But I have to bear up, there are other things waiting for me and many of them will undoubtedly be much worse."

**Katie:** Across Poland, the country with Europe's largest Jewish population, Jewish people were rounded up and made to live in ghettos: crowded walled-off sections of cities where they were isolated from the rest of the population. The largest ghetto was in Warsaw in Poland, and it had over 400,000 Jewish people living in appalling conditions, and it's estimated that up to 100,000 people died of starvation and disease there.

**Datshiane:** In June 1941, Germany invaded the Soviet Union, this was codenamed Operation Barbarossa, and it was the largest military invasion in history.

**Katie:** As the German Army advanced east they continued to commit atrocities against Jewish people.

**Datshiane:** The atrocities were committed by Nazi killing squads called the Einsatzgruppen, who followed the German Army into occupied territories.

**Katie:** Made up from 3,000 SS troops, the Einsatzgruppen carried out mass shootings.

**Datshiane:** The Einsatzgruppen sometimes worked with the Waffen SS.

**Katie:** Who were a Nazi military force fiercely loyal to Hitler.

**Datshiane:** And the Order Police.

**Katie:** Who were responsible for maintaining internal order and enforcing Nazi laws and policies.

**Datshiane:** They were also helped by local collaborators in the territories they occupied, as well as non-German police forces of occupied countries.

**Katie:** In September 1941, members of the Einsatzgruppen murdered almost 34,000 Jewish people over a two-day period at Babyn Yar, near the city of Kyiv in Ukraine. This was one of the many sites of mass murder of Jewish people across Eastern Europe.

**Datshiane:** It is estimated that by 1944 over two million Jewish people had been murdered in this way. Historians have referred to the Nazis' policy of committing mass murder by shooting as 'the Holocaust by bullets'.

**Katie:** In January 1942, a conference was held on the outskirts of Berlin in Wannsee. This was a high-level meeting of Nazi officials to coordinate the plan referred to as 'The Final Solution of the Jewish Question', or simply 'The Final Solution'. This was the Nazi euphemism for the plan to murder all European Jewish people.

**Datshiane:** While mass killings were already taking place, the Wannsee Conference marked a crucial step in translating Nazi antisemitic ideology into an industrialised process of mass murder of every Jewish person in German-occupied Europe.

**Katie:** From the spring of 1942, Jewish people from across Europe were deported to killing sites in Eastern Europe, especially German-occupied Poland. Most were sent to death or extermination camps including Belzec, Chelmno, Sobibor and Treblinka, where almost everyone was murdered in gas chambers as soon as they arrived.

**Datshiane:** Others were sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration and death camp, where many Jewish people were also murdered in gas chambers, but some were selected to work and later died of forced labour, starvation, or executions. A concentration camp in Majdanek sometimes had a similar role.

**Katie:** Jewish people were transported there from the ghettos all over Europe, as were other groups deemed as undesirable to the Nazis, including Slavic people, Roma and Sinti, political opponents, homosexuals and black people.

**Datshiane:** Six million Jewish men, women and children were murdered by the Nazis during World War II, and this attempt to wipe out the Jewish people is the definition of the Holocaust.

**Katie:** Only Jewish people were targeted for complete extermination, but the Nazis also murdered members of additional groups deemed undesirable, including Slavic people, Roma and Sinti and Germans with disabilities.

**Datshiane:** They also persecuted some other groups within Germany itself, including political opponents, gay men, black people, and Jehovah's Witnesses. For example, several hundred mixed heritage people in the Rhineland region of Western Germany were forcibly sterilised to prevent them ever having children in the future.

**Katie:** It's important to remember that there was Jewish resistance to Nazis both within the ghettos and concentration camps. In Treblinka in 1943 a Jewish resistance group revolted, set fire to camp buildings; and despite facing machine gun fire several hundred managed to break out of the camp. Although many of them were captured and killed it is thought that around 70 survived the end of the war. And in the Warsaw Ghetto in April 1943, an uprising against the SS soldiers in charge lasted 43 days before the synagogue in the ghetto was destroyed.

**Datshiane:** On the 16th of April in 1943, Mordecai Anielewicz, one of the leaders of the uprising wrote to his friend Yizhak Zuckerman: "It is impossible to describe the conditions reigning in the ghetto. Very few could bear all this, all the others are destined to perish sooner or later, their fate has been sealed. In most of the bunkers where thousands of Jews are hiding it is impossible to light a candle because of the lack of air. What we have experienced cannot be described in words. We are aware of one thing only: what has happened has exceeded our dreams. The Germans ran twice from the ghetto. Perhaps we will meet again, but what really matters is that the dream of my life has come true. Jewish self-defence of the Warsaw Ghetto has become a fact. Jewish armed resistance and retaliation have become a reality. I have been witness to the magnificent heroic struggle of the Jewish fighters."

**Katie:** Thanks, Datshiane, that's a powerful source describing first-hand the appalling events he is living through. This section has contained a heavy weight of history and information, so do feel free to reflect and pause before we move on.

**Katie:** Okay, let's summarise the key events from this episode.

**Datshiane:** As the Nazis occupied Europe Jewish people were forced to live in ghettos, and eventually they were transported to concentration, or death camps.

**Katie:** This was part of the Nazis' Final Solution, to exterminate every Jewish person in occupied Europe.

**Datshiane:** The Holocaust is the term given to the murder of six million Jews, in an attempt to wipe out the Jewish people.

**Katie:** If today's episode has stirred difficult emotions please know it's okay to feel this way. It's important to talk about what you've learned and if you need to reach out to a teacher, friend or family member.

**Datshiane:** You might want to listen and stop the episode again to summarise your thoughts and subject knowledge. There's more information on the Bitesize website about the Holocaust. Remember this was a dark period in history, but hopefully it also teaches us how to build a more compassionate future.

**Katie:** In the final episode of this series, we'll be revising the de-Nazification of Germany, and the emergence of East and West Germany. Thanks for listening.