BBC iWonder

WHY DID ORDINARY PEOPLE COMMIT ATROCITIES IN THE HOLOCAUST?

Video transcript: Why did they do it?

These people were from everyday walks of life: an office worker, a policeman, a prison guard, even a nurse. But they all committed the most horrific atrocities in the Nazi era.

To even try to understand, we have to step back into their world. In the early 20th century, anti-Semitism was widespread across Europe. In some places, the Jews were seen as threatening outsiders. In other places, some still saw the Jews as being responsible for the death of Jesus.

As the Nazis rose to power in Germany, Hitler exploited these feelings. He blamed the Jews for undermining Germany during World War One and causing its humiliating defeat. He blamed the Jews for bringing about the 1929 Wall Street Crash, which saw millions join the jobless queue.

Extract from speech by Hitler, translated from German:

It is a people who are at home both nowhere and everywhere, who do not have anywhere a soil on which they have grown up. But who live in Berlin today, Brussels tomorrow, Paris the day after, then Prague, Vienna or London - and who feel at home everywhere.

Shout from Hitler's audience: Jews!

Anti-Jewish propaganda was everywhere: on the front page of newspapers, in children's books. Anti-Semitism became part of the school curriculum, even for four-year-olds. This picture was in a book for pre-schoolers, drawn by an 18-year-old illustrator.

We can't say for sure just how many lives were lost because of these messages. But it is likely that by the time World War Two started, the Jews had been dehumanised in the eyes of large numbers of people.

Only a courageous few objected when Jews in their area were rounded up for deportation. In fact, many took the opportunity to make some money by taking Jews' possessions. Often the police, doing the round-ups, and then their neighbours once their properties had been vacated.

The death camps offered more opportunities to profit. This footage shows the mountains of possessions taken from people murdered in one of the camps.

Witnesses reported seeing guards take jewellery and other valuables, which they then traded for alcohol and sex in neighbouring villages. Death was now part of people's day jobs. They stood, shoulder to shoulder, in professions where playing by the rules and being considered for promotion meant killing.

But after the war, some people used this to excuse their actions. They said that they were just following orders – and were too scared of the consequences to disobey.

Archive photographs, illustrations, audio and video

- *Policeman: Anthony Sawoniuk © Mark St George / Enterprise News and Pictures*
- *Camp guard: Hermine Braunestein © Yad Vashem*
- *Office worker: Maurice Papon © Getty Images*
- *Nurse: Irmgard Huber © United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Rosanne Bass Fulton*
- *Courtesy of The Wiener Library:*
  - *Orthodox Jews from Eastern Europe in 1920's Berlin*
  - *Anti-Semitic graffiti on a wall in Germany ca. early 1930s*
  - *Graffiti 'Heil Hitler. Juda Verrecke' ("Hail Hitler. Perish Judah')*
  - *Adolf Hitler at Nazi party rally in Bückeberg 1934*
  - *Front page of Nazi newspaper 'Der Stürmer' of 1934*
  - *Anti-Semitic drawing of a young Aryan girl in a Jewish doctor's waiting room by Philipp Rupprecht*
  - *Illustration from an anti-Semitic children's book from Nazi Germany published 1936*
  - *Deportation of Jews from German-occupied Poland ca. 1942*
  - *Hitler speaking at the Nazi party rally in Nuremberg 1935*
- *Queue of unemployed people, Berlin (Germany), early 1930s © Getty Images*
- *Hitler anti-Semitic speech © Transit Film / Bundesarchiv*
- *Prisoners in Auschwitz-Birkenau (Nazi Concentration and Extermination Camp), courtesy of Steven Spielberg Film and Video Archive, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.*