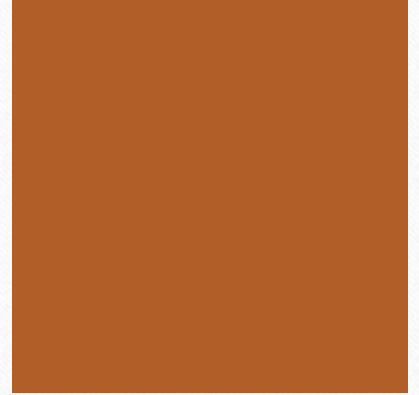


By: Anika Weiss

5.04 Holocaust Museum Exhibit

Targeted Group: Jehovah's Witnesses

- Image 1: May 1945: Gusen Concentration Camp. Photo of 24 JW survivors of that camp.
- Image 2: Franz and Hilda Kusserow standing behind all 11 of their children prior to the death of two of their sons, Wilhelm and Wolfgang (second and seventh from the left respectively), whom the Nazis executed for conscientious objection.



Prisoners had color triangles to identify various groups, Jehovah's Witnesses wore a purple triangle.

•Why was this group persecuted?

•Jehovah's Witnesses were a target for persecution by Hitler due to their refusal to salute the Nazi Flag or speak the words, "Heil Hitler." Their persecution was unique in that, "they were freed from prison camps if they renounced their religion, but few did." A website known as JW.org has documentaries on the persecution. According to this website, Witnesses were persecuted primarily for two reasons, 1. Jehovah's Witnesses living under Nazi rule chose to remain politically neutral. 2. They were forbidden to practice their faith and they refused to comply to this. For these reasons, they were persecuted and imprisoned for their beliefs and neutrality.



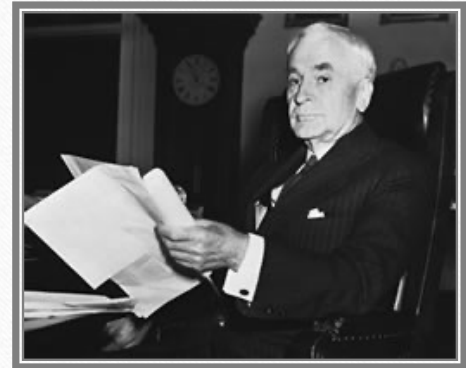


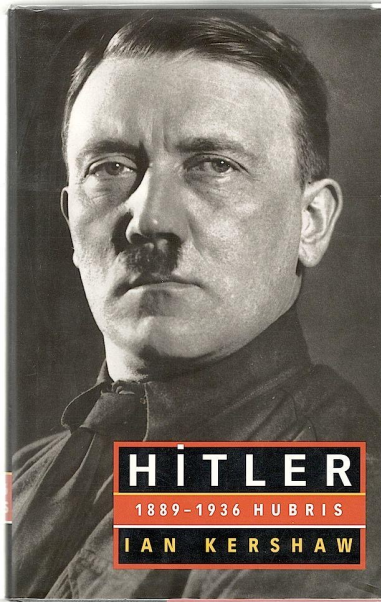
Rudolf Auschner: Executed via guillotine at Halle/Saale at age 17. He wrote a farewell letter to his mother, saying, “Many brothers have walked this path, and so will I.”

- **What did this group experience during the Holocaust?**
- During the Holocaust, about 1,500 Jehovah’s Witnesses died out of 35,000 Witnesses in Germany and other occupied countries. Many Witnesses, close to 400 were executed. More than 1,000 of them died in prisons and concentration camps, due to being worked to death, tortured, starved, or exposed to illnesses with poor medical care. Others were killed due by means of medical experiments, lethal injections, guillotine and gas chambers.

How did the United States Respond?

- The United States initially heard of the, Nazi death camps around August 1942. These reports were initially buried because, “under Secretary of State Cordell Hull, the State Department still maintained a policy that made it hard for refugees to obtain visas.” Eventually, by April 1943 the US and British governments started discussing options to rescue victims of the Holocaust. Interestingly, the United States Branch Office of Jehovah’s Witnesses were historically known for organizing a signed protest to the Hitler Government in Berlin. On October 7th, 1934, this protest was sent in the form of a resolution via cable, to the Nazi government organized by the US branch office, “Your ill-treatment of Jehovah’s witnesses shocks all good people of earth and dishonors God’s name. Refrain from further persecuting Jehovah’s witnesses; otherwise God will destroy you and your national party.” This protest was supported by Jehovah’s Witnesses around the world in 50 countries and about 20,000 signed letters and telegrams were also sent on the same night of October 7, 1934.





What were the effects of the Holocaust on this group?

- As a result of being banned and persecuted. Many lost jobs, their homes were raided, and children were expelled from school. Many were beaten, arrested and imprisoned. Jehovah's witnesses too became targets of their neighbors and were watched and reported on. In his book *Hitler – 1889-1936* historian professor, Ian Kershaw noted this persecution saying that the Witnesses became a target because they refused to the total claim of the Nazi State. This provoked the anger of the Nazi's and put them in harm's way. By 1939 6,000 were imprisoned, and some 2,000 died. Nonetheless, wrote Professors Ericksen and Heschel, "Jehovah's Witnesses largely held to their faith in the face of trouble." As a result, when Hitler's regime fell, over a thousand Witnesses emerged victorious from the camps. Though facing strong persecution, they triumphed as integrity keepers by not giving in.

Source List:

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- Hitler: 1889-1936, Ian Kershaw
- Betrayal: German Churches and the Holocaust edited by Robert P. Ericksen and Susannah Heschel
- Photo credit: <https://www.jw.org/en/news/releases/by-region/austria/mauthausen-gusen-concentration-camps/>
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