

## **THE HOLOCAUST AND DR. JOSEF MENGELE HISTORICAL ANALYSIS ESSAY ON THE HOLOCAUST**

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During the Second World War, Nazi regime led by Adolf Hitler instituted a coordinated and well organized industrialized genocide on millions of civilians and prisoners of war, claiming victims such as Slavs, Romani, gypsies, gays, the disabled, and anybody the German Reich deemed inferior and an obstacle; most infamously, the Jewish population. With the collaboration of sympathizers in the conquered countries, they killed 11 million people in total of which six million were Jews. There are a myriad of stories and documentation about both the victims of the Holocaust and the perpetrators of this crime against humanity, but none are as terrifying as the story of Dr. Josef Mengele, the so-called Angel of Death. This essay will explain the origins of Dr. Josef Mengele, the general impact of the Holocaust and how Mengele's actions compare with historical data about the Holocaust during 1942-1945.

### **Mengele's life and work**

Mengele's legacy and atrocities in the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp cannot be overstated but his experiments were just one result of a carefully planned and organized industrialized genocide of the European Jewish population known as the Holocaust. Mengele's contribution to the genocide was possible due to the organization and design of men like Adolf Eichmann, Reinhard Heydrich, Heinrich Himmler, Alfred Rosenberg, Dr. Verschuer, and the "final solution" that Adolf Hitler preached in his speeches as the final fate of the "Jewish problem." This was not just the work of one man and his experiments, it was also the work of doctors, professors, ministers, soldiers, economists, and other members of society who were all given the job to exterminate a population for the sake of a "better, purer Germany." The idea of "final solution" began with the advent of Nazi ideology and inflammatory rhetoric by fanatics and racists. A turning point was the 1923 Beer

Hall Putschcoup, an attempt by the Nazis to take control of the city of Munich that ended in failure and culminated in Hitler's brief arrest. The calamity of the Great Depression in 1929 built the foundation for the rise of the German for the National Socialist German Worker's Party (NSDAP) or "Nazi" party. The seizure of the apparatus of state by the Nazis commenced a period of transformation of Germany from a democracy to an authoritarian state where the rights of minorities were slowly reversed or eliminated, enemies of the state were persecuted, and rearmament was established. With the consolidation of power to racial ideologues and the dehumanization of minorities underway, the stage was set for an organized genocide of immense proportions.

Dr. Josef Mengele was born in Ginzburg, Bavaria in 1911 to a wealthy family who owned the Karl Mengele and Sons Company that produced farm machinery equipment. During his youth he was a quiet student but later became more socially active and adept compared to his peers in his classes. He enrolled in the University of Munich in April 1930 where he first studied philosophy and later medicine. During his time in Munich he was influenced by the ideas of Alfred Rosenberg, who would later be the minister of foreign policy of the Third Reich. Rosenberg's ideas consisted of an anti-Semitic, anti-Bolshevik ideology with emphasis in racial theory and anti-communism. Rosenberg was an early member of the NSDAP helping his rhetoric form the foundation of Nazi ideology to which both Hitler and Mengele subscribed. "While he was in prison, Rosenberg wrote an autobiography, published in 1955, in which, far from showing any sign of remorse, he reasserted his belief that 'National Socialism was a European answer to the question of this century ... It was a genuine social world view and an ideal of blood-conditioned cultural purity'" (Evans, 2016, May 5). He was also intrigued by the concept of social Darwinism and eugenics (the belief and practice of prioritizing a population and eliminating those deemed weak by "natural elimination" or "natural selection"). In 1931, Mengele joined the Stahlhelm, a right-wing paramilitary organization formed after World War I by disillusioned veterans and reservists. Their purpose was to restore the monarchy and were vehemently anti-democratic. They later were integrated into the Nazi Storm Detachment (S.A) in 1934 after the Nazis took power. In 1935 Mengele earned a Ph.D. in Anthropology and in 1937 he joined the Institute for Hereditary Biology and Racial Hygiene and worked with Dr. Omar Freiherr von Verschuer who had an interest in researching genetics in twins. He later fully joined the Nazi party in 1937, received military training with the mountain infantry in 1939, called up for service in the Wehrmacht (the German Armed Forces) in 1940 and became part of the SS military wing, and the Waffen-SS in 1941 when the Soviet Union was invaded. There he had the title of second lieutenant and served as a medic in the Eastern Front. He received the Iron Cross after helping two men off a destroyed tank.

After being wounded in combat, he was declared unfit for frontline service, and rejoined von Verschuer who convinced him to transfer to the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp.

Mengele used Auschwitz to further his research on genetics and his studies about twins and heredity, often using humans for experimentation. He was notorious for his lack of empathy and not using pain relievers. "At last, the chance to do the kind of research Mengele had dreamed of. At Auschwitz, there would be nothing to stand in his way" (Lagnado & Dekel, 1992, p. 52). In the complex he was given the job of camp SS doctor where he carried out selections for the gas chambers, a job he enjoyed, but his fellow companions did not. When an outbreak of typhus and the noma disease spread through the camp, Mengele oversaw the response, studying and working to resolve the outbreak. He then rounded up the infected in a quarantined barrack and had them killed and dissected for scientists in the SS medical academy in Graz. Mengele dealt with the typhus epidemic by separating the healthy from the sick and sending the infected to the gas chambers. Mengele's subjects were better fed, housed than the other prisoners, but that was a façade to what he did to them. The twins were subjected to many examinations and experiments made without anesthesia, including limb cutting, blood transfusion, chloroform injection, body conjunction, and changing the eye color with chemicals which often turned people blind. After the experiments were completed, he would often terminate the subjects if they were of no use for him. By June 1945, the war was nearing its end and the Soviet army had advanced to the Eastern Front. Mengele abandoned the camp and was transferred to the Gross Rosen Prison camp where he escaped. He narrowly escaped the authorities during the Nuremberg Trials and sailed to Argentina to hide taking on an alias to prevent discovery. He stayed in Argentina for 15 years until in 1960 when Israeli intelligence tracked him down and filed an extradition order for his arrest and transfer to Israel for trial. However, he escaped to Brazil where he stayed with the Stammer family on a coffee farm near Sao Paulo until 1979 when he had a stroke and drowned in a swimming pool.

### **Germany under Nazi rule and the Holocaust**

Mengele indeed reflected a microcosm of what cruelties the Nazis have done to its victims. He was one of the more fanatic members of those responsible for the genocide. But he was only one component in a carefully designed machine consisting of bureaucrats, public officials, private individuals, and military officials, that was progressively being built up for years before he became a player in the genocide. Individuals like Mengele were seduced by Nazi fanaticism, but the rest of

the German population also went along. Societal violence towards a minority takes a buildup of racist propaganda, manipulation, and desensitization of marginalized communities for the violence to become “accepted.” Apathy, mostly in part by moderate individuals and the argument of “necessity” and “national duty” are elements the Nazis used, with time and effort, to hijack German society to commit the Holocaust. The Holocaust itself originated from a set of discriminatory policies of the Nazis against the Jews in their territories since they took power in 1933.

The implementation of Nazi racial theory and ideology was divided into two phases: marginalization and extermination. Marginalization of the Jews started at the same time the Nazis took power in 1933 when they enacted multiple measures designed to reverse the emancipation of Jews in Germany. They were forbidden to engage in their professional or business activities. In 1935 the Nuremberg Laws made intermarriage between Jews and Germans unlawful, and deprived Jews from their citizenship becoming aliens in the Reich. Even though individual violence towards Jews was common, the state pursued judicial anti-Semitism until 1938 with the *Reichskristallnacht*, the first public and violent mass manifestation of anti-Semitism in Germany. The event was caused by a reaction to the murder of German diplomat Ernst von Rath by a Polish Jew (the perpetrator, Herszel Grynszpan, acted alone, the state exaggerated the act). “Immediately after Joseph Goebbels’s speech in Munich, Stormtroopers were ordered to attack Jewish homes, businesses and synagogues” (Orlow, 2018, p. 221). The Nazis’ discriminatory practices escalated by isolating Jewish communities into ghettos or by deportation from the country until 1940. Kristallnacht was the last violent operation by the stormtroopers. The responsibility of the Holocaust and the second phase was handed over to the SS headed by Reinhard Heydrich, Heinrich Himmler, and Ernst Kaltenbrunner. The SS was originally a fanatical paramilitary for the NSDAP that later became an official division of the Wehrmacht that were loyal only to Hitler and his party tasked with carrying out terror activities on enemies of the Reich and the Nazis’ ideological mission.

The second phase of the Holocaust, also called the “Final Solution,” began in 1942 with the eviction of the Jewish ghettos and transportation of the victims to general concentration camps built throughout the Third Reich, of which the most infamous were Bergen-Belsen and Auschwitz-Birkenau. Jews from all the German occupied territories and satellite states were to be surrendered to the SS to be relocated to the concentration camps where they would either be worked to death, starved to death, die of disease, or were murdered by being burned alive, shot, gassed with Zyklon B, or experimented on. This was possible due to rampant corruption and ineptitude that plagued the provisional governments of the occupied territories

or *Reichskommissarats* such as the Low Countries, France, Norway, the Balkans, the Baltic States, and, especially, Poland and Ukraine, who had neither the power nor the capacity to oppose the SS from carrying out their extermination and relocation orders. However, the SS *Einatzgruppen* (death squads) were not the only responsible organization, as units of the Wehrmacht and local police aided in the mass killings. The area where relocations were more relentless was in Poland and Ukraine, which happened to have a large minority of Jews who lived in pogroms “Jewish Communities” and other people the Nazis wished to exterminate. As for the general impact of the Holocaust, 6 million Jews were slaughtered, 2 million of those originating from Western Europe and 4 million from Eastern Europe.

### **Concluding remarks**

The buildup of discriminatory practices, the entrenchment of radical extreme right ideologies and the nature of Nazi controlled Germany show a chain of events that upon learning, expresses caution and scrutiny to ideologues and demagoguery of such fashion. Mengele’s rise was reliant upon the historical events and influenced by men of the worst kind. Mengele was driven by Nazi ideology and his career path to serve the Reich anywhere he could without question, which led him to Auschwitz. After transforming the German society by using mass media and propaganda, and by performing a paradigm shift on German society’s view towards minorities as a threat that necessitates elimination, the Nazis were able to use them for their nefarious purposes. Mengele himself was exposed to and accepted this reality much like the rest of Germany, the difference between fanatics like him and the rest lies in his will to serve the Reich and submit to the ideology. It is terrifying to think that a middle-class well-off man with a future and with no background problems would turn into such a monster fed only by fervent ideology and an unyielding desire to serve the Reich on his field, as well as turning normal people into servants of a regime that preached the wholesale extermination of an entire population. It exposes the fact that even under a morally abhorrent regime, they still manage, with careful manipulation and opportunism, to shift society on its axis and commit crimes against humanity. As Orlow states:

It is impossible to think of the history of the Third Reich and Nazi rule in Europe without at the same time taking account of the Holocaust. This systematic program of genocide was not an incidental aspect of the Nazis’ drive for power but an essential part of their program. (2018, p. 220)

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