

The Holocaust in Austria

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Violence from the First Days

Vienna erupted in antisemitic violence immediately after the Nazi takeover on March 12, 1938. Jewish organizations and newspaper were shut down. Many Austrian civilians enthusiastically joined Nazis in terrorizing Jews. Jewish women were forced to scrub the sidewalks wearing their best clothes.¹ Some Jews were forced to scrub with toothbrushes, others with their bare hands.² Jewish actresses were forced to clean Austrian Storm Troopers' toilets. Average Austrians forced Jews off public transportation. Austrian Hitler Youth pulled religious Jewish men around by their beards. The violence lasted for days as Nazis and others ransacked Jewish shops, neighborhoods, and stores, stealing what pleased them.³

Forced Immigration

German Nazi troops arrived in Austria on March 12, 1938. A few days later, Adolf Eichmann established the Central Office for Jewish Emigration in Vienna. The office prepared the paperwork for Jews forced to leave their homeland: in exchange for their citizenship, property rights, and a great deal of money, Jews received a passport that expired after only fourteen days. But in order to get a visa to enter another country, someone in that country had to vouch that they would not become a public burden. Even if Jews had such a voucher, getting a visa meant standing in line at a foreign embassy for hours or days, in all weather. Tens of thousands of Vienna's Jews were too old or sick to endure this process, let alone move to a new country. But 50,000 Jews went through Eichmann's office even though the cost left them nearly penniless. Tens of thousands of others wanted to but could not.⁴

In the first three months, 18,000 Jews left. Thirty-two thousand followed in the next three months. Many more were turned back at the Swiss, Hungarian and Czechoslovakian borders.⁵ Switzerland complained to Germany that too many Jews were fleeing crossing the border. In response, Germany recalled all Jewish passports on October 5, 1938. Germany stamped the new Jewish passports with a large red "J" so Swiss, Hungarian, and Czechoslovakian border guards could tell who was Jewish and turn them back.⁶

By 1942, 128,500 Jews were forced to emigrate. But 67,500 others would be deported to labor and death camps, where 65000 were murdered. At the end of World War II, only 2, 142 Austrian Jews would be liberated from concentration camps. 6,200 would survive in Vienna, having married Christians or having been baptized before 1938. 700 more were hidden throughout the war.⁷

Antisemitic Laws

New anti-Jewish laws made conditions in Vienna similar to those Jews endured in the Middle Ages, restricting and then prohibiting Jewish attendance at the university. Within days Jewish actors, musicians and journalists were arrested. First fired were state and municipal employees followed by public school teachers and bank employees. Jews could not use public baths, swimming pools, or park benches. Signs forbade their entrance at theaters, concerts, and businesses. Jewish school children were segregated. The Nuremberg laws which had restricted Jewish citizenship in Germany since 1935 were put into effect in Austria, as well. By September 1939, Jews were banned completely from parks and public gardens. Jewish lawyers and doctors could no longer have non-Jewish clients. Jews could not attend sporting events. In September 1939 they were not allowed to go out after 8 pm or listen to the radio, measures which made mass arrests easier. Beginning in September 1941 they had to wear a Jewish Star of David or face imprisonment.⁸

Resistance

From the first days of Nazi terror, anyone who complained to the police was beaten and arrested.⁹ The first night of German occupation, between ten and twenty-thousand Austrians suspected of opposing the Nazis were arrested. Austrian Nazis had lists of enemies ready: Social Democrats who had fought against Austro-fascism in the Civil War in 1934, communists, members of Catholic youth organizations, Fatherland Front representatives, labor organizers and, of course, Jews.¹⁰

Of the 154 prisoners sent to Dachau on April 1, 1938, sixty were Jews. Five-thousand more suspected resisters were sent to Dachau in May, many Jews among them.¹¹ Within six weeks women were receiving packages from Dachau with their husband's ashes inside. They could have their husbands' remains if they could pay the 150 marks for cremation.¹²

During a boycott of Jewish shops from April 23 to April 25, 1938, Nazi Storm Troopers (SA) arrested Christians who tried to shop in Jewish stores and forced them to wear signs that read "Christian Pig."¹³ Although the hierarchy of the Catholic Church cooperated with the Nazis at first, many local parish priests resisted, were arrested, and sentenced to a month or more of imprisonment.¹⁴

Jewish Businesses "Aryanized"

In March, 1938, Nazis announced plans to make Vienna "German" again by "aryanizing" Jewish businesses within four years.¹⁵ "Aryanization" meant confiscation or forced sale far below the real value. But so many Austrian Nazis stole Jewish businesses and property in the first weeks that German Nazi Party charged thousands with theft—not from the Jews but from the German Reich. The Nazis believed all Jewish property belonged to the Reich. Jews had lost their property rights: in April 1938, they were ordered to register all their possessions.¹⁶ The Property Traffic Office closed 80% of Jewish businesses.¹⁷ The remaining 20% were allowed to stay open but operated by Germans. By May 1939, only 6% of Vienna's Jews were still employed.¹⁸ Foreign aid agencies provided emergency food and helped impoverished Jews pay the fees required to leave Austria.¹⁹

Kristallnacht

Beginning in October 1938, Nazis dragged Jews from bed, beat them up and damaged businesses, prayer houses, and synagogues. The worst night of violence was planned to coincide with Kristallnacht in Germany. On November 9, 1938, all but one or two of synagogues were destroyed and seventy prayer houses burned or damaged by grenades. Four thousand shops were looted. Anyone who attempted to defend his property was beaten to death. In utter despair, 680 Jews committed suicide. Twenty-seven were murdered and 88 seriously injured. Sixty five hundred Jews were arrested in Vienna alone and 1200 in the rest of Austria. Men were forced to exercise to exhaustion as punishment and women were humiliated in front of the SA.²⁰

Isolation, Deportation, and Extermination

By December 1938, Nazis had seized 44,000 out of 70,000 Jewish apartments. As many as five or six families were forced to live in one apartment. Often all the residents of an apartment would be given just hours or days to move again. The resulting sanitary problems became "evidence" that Jews needed to be deported.²¹

The first "systematic effort to expel Jews"²² in the Nazi Reich occurred in the rural Austrian province of Burgenland. Beginning on March 26, 1938, Jews were driven from their homes into stables and beaten. Some were murdered. Twelve hundred were forced to immigrate.²³ Although deportations to Poland began in 1939, most took place between 15 February 1941 and September 1942. Of the 48000 religious Jews transported at this time, 70 % were gassed at Auschwitz. By May 1942, only 8100 Jews remained in Vienna. Other Austrian cities were declared "free of Jews" by 1942.²⁴

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 - 3 Pauley, 280-1
 - 4 Dwork, 98
 - 5 Pauley, 281, 293-294
 - 6 Yahill, Leni. *The Holocaust : the Fate of European Jewry, 1932-1945*. New York : Oxford University Press, 1990 108
 - 7 Dwork, 121, Pauley, 293-297
 - 8 Pauley, 281-284, 290-292
 - 9 Pauley, 281
 - 10 Herbert Steiner, "The Role of Austrian Resistance with Special Reference to the Labor Movement" (*The Journal of Modern History* Volume 64, Supplement: Resistance Against the Third Reich, Dec. 1992), 131.
 - 11 Pauley, 281-282
 - 12 Pauley, 292, Dwork, 98
 - 13 Pauley, 281
 - 14 Hanisch, Ernst. "Austrian Catholicism." Parkinson, F. ed. *Conquering the Past*. Wayne State: Detroit, 1989, 169
 - 15 Pauley, 290
 - 16 Dwork, 98
 - 17 Yahill, 107
 - 18 Pauley 284
 - 19 Pauley, 294
 - 20 Pauley, 287
 - 21 Pauley, 289
 - 22 Bukey, Evan Burr. *Hitler's Austria: Popular Sentiment in the Nazi Era, 1938-1945*. U North Carolina: Chapel Hill, 2000, 138
 - 23 Ibid.
 - 24 Pauley, 281