

# History, Weimar and Nazi Germany

## Lesson 31

**This lesson covers content on the persecution of minorities in Nazi Germany between 1933-1939. The minorities that are examined include people with disabilities, Roma, Sinti and Gypsy communities, black people, homosexuals and Jews. If this is a sensitive topic to you, we recommend checking with a trusted adult before starting or doing the lesson with a trusted adult nearby.**

Miss Shanks



History, Weimar and Nazi Germany

Lesson 31

# **How did the Nazi Party view and portray minorities in society?**

Miss Shanks



# What were Nazi beliefs and attitudes about race?

**Hitler** believed that **Aryans** were the superior race, or 'master race', and believed that Germans were a pure race of **Aryan** descent, but that this race had lost its purity. He believed that inferior races which were seen as being subhuman (*untermenschen*) had contaminated the 'pure blood' of the **Aryan** race which caused it to lose its purity. As a result, **Hitler** used methods to try and achieve this, such as **eugenics** (selective breeding) and introducing policies and laws to stop relationships between **Aryans** and non-Aryans within Germany.



# People with disabilities

The Nazis viewed people with disabilities as a burden on society and weakened racial purity. On **14th July 1933**, the Nazi government announced a law called the **Law for the Prevention of Hereditarily Diseased Offspring**, this law meant that it was now legal to **sterilise** anyone suffering from a list of wide-ranging diseases which the Nazis believed could be transmitted genetically. This included people with **learning disabilities, blindness, deafness, epilepsy, depression, alcoholism** – and in particular, the **mentally or physically disabled**.

Credit: Holocaust Educational Trust



The Nazis wanted to **sterilise** these people because they argued that they threatened the purity of the German race. By preventing them from having children, it was felt that in time these “disabilities” could be removed from the population. **Between 1934 and 1939 around 400,000 people were sterilised** – often against their will.

Credit: Holocaust Educational Trust



With the outbreak of war, a new policy emerged. In late summer 1939 the Nazis ordered that children with severe mental or physical disabilities should be killed, this became known as the **T4 Programme**. All children with a “severe hereditary illness” were to be registered, before a team of “experts” would decide based on this registration form whether they would live or die. Those selected for death were transported to special children’s wards in hospitals with **parents being told this was to provide specialist care and treatment**. Whilst here, death was caused either through **deliberate starvation** or a **lethal combination of drugs**. By 1945, it is estimated that around **5,000 children with disabilities had been killed**. The total number of people killed through the **child and adult programmes is believed to be at least 200,000**.

Credit: Holocaust Educational Trust



**Theresia Karas** was born on 13th May 1928 in Salzburg, Austria. When she was just two years old, **Theresia caught polio, a highly infectious disease, which crippled one of her hands.** She also suffered from **epilepsy.** In 1933, **Theresia** spent a lot of time in different hospitals. She was given treatment for her hand, and then spent six months in hospital after surgery on her brain. From 1934 to 1937, **Theresia** was well enough to go to primary school where she was supported by her siblings. However, by the time she was nine her epilepsy had become worse and she had to spend the next two years at home. On 21st September 1939, **Theresia** was admitted for therapy at the Diakoniewerk Gallneukirchen – a home for the disabled run by the Church. For the next two years she corresponded regularly with her family.

Credit: Holocaust Educational Trust



On 13th January 1941, twelve year-old **Theresia** was **one of 59 people transported to Hartheim Castle where she was murdered**. Five days later, the family were informed that **Theresia** had been transferred to a psychiatric hospital in Germany. The family were suspicious, and frantically tried to contact **Theresia** by visiting her and by writing a letter. Finally on 28th January her parents were told that she had died two days earlier of a blood infection. A few weeks later they received an urn, apparently with **Theresia's** ashes in it, but none of her personal belongings. Theresia's family were still suspicious, and turned to **Anna Perner**, one of the nuns of the church where **Theresia** had spent time earlier. In time she sent them a padded envelope with a note hidden in it, telling them that Theresia had been murdered.

Credit: Holocaust Educational Trust



# Homosexuals

**Despite homosexuality being illegal**, an active gay culture developed before World War I in larger cities. **Berlin became the centre of gay life in Europe in the 1920s** whilst homosexuality was openly represented in books, magazines and movies. Many conservatives, along with the churches, were opposed to this increase in gay rights which they saw as a sign of Germany's supposed moral decline. The Nazi leadership generally agreed, although for racist rather than religious reasons: **homosexuality was seen as a threat to the survival of the German 'master race'**, partly because it was **believed that gay men were naturally weak and would therefore not be capable of fighting for Germany**. The **SS** leader, **Heinrich Himmler**, also argued that **homosexuality was a danger to the nation because it meant that there were men who were not fathering children**.

Credit: Holocaust Educational Trust



However, not all Nazis shared these prejudices. In particular, **Ernst Röhm**, the leader of the **SA**, was himself **openly gay and had campaigned for equal rights**. Many German homosexuals therefore believed that they would be safe when the Nazis came to power in January 1933. However, within weeks, the **police closed well known gay meeting places, such as bars and clubs**, and the new secret police force, the **Gestapo**, began to compile 'pink lists' of gay men for future arrest. Persecution increased after **Ernst Röhm** and other **SA** leaders were murdered on the '**Night of the Long Knives**' in the summer of 1934. **Röhm** was killed for political reasons, not because of his sexuality, but **homophobic propaganda was used to justify his murder**. His removal also gave his rival **Himmler** increasing control over persecution in Germany. The result was an **increase in the arrests of gay men** in late 1934.

Credit: Holocaust Educational Trust



However, the real turning point came in **June 1935** when the Nazis changed the law against homosexuality to **include any act which could be considered homosexual**. Anyone found guilty under this law could be **sentenced to up to 10 years in prison**. The consequence was a massive increase in the number of arrests and sentences: **around 22,000 gay men were sent to prison between 1936 and 1938 compared to 4,000 in 1933-34**. Most of these men served their sentences in prison but from 1937 onwards large numbers were sent to **concentration camps**, in many cases after they had finished a prison sentence. Estimates of the number of gay men sent to the camps **range from 5,000 to 15,000**. Homosexual prisoners were marked out by being **forced to wear a pink triangle on their uniforms**. Some gay men were also victims of horrific medical procedures because **Himmler** and many **Nazi doctors believed that they could be 'cured' of their homosexuality**.

Credit: Holocaust Educational Trust



Even though the **50,000 gay men who were imprisoned** were only a small fraction of the 2 million that **Himmler** believed lived in Germany, all gay men found their lives affected by the Nazis. They were **forced to live in greater secrecy with the constant risk of being reported to the police.** By contrast, **lesbians were not targeted by the Nazis** although a small number were arrested for not behaving in a way expected in Nazi Germany.

Credit: Holocaust Educational Trust



**Richard Grune** was born on 2nd August 1903 in northern Germany. He was interested in drawing from an early age and he attended art college in the nearby city of Kiel. In 1922 he **moved to Weimar to study** at the world famous **Bauhaus school**. **Richard** had his first exhibition in 1926 and he was seen as **an artist with a promising future**. He also developed a passion for art education and **began to teach poor children** in Kiel. **Richard often visited Berlin, where a large and open gay scene allowed him more freedom**. He eventually moved to Berlin in February 1933. However, he arrived in the capital only a few weeks after the Nazis had come to power. The police increasingly raided gay bars and clubs and arrested homosexual men. **Richard** was himself **arrested on 4th December 1934**. He was held for five months in Lichtenberg **concentration camp** until May 1935 when he was sent back his hometown to await his trial.

Credit: Holocaust Educational Trust



The trial took place in September 1936 (three months after the law against homosexuality had been tightened) and **Richard** was **sentenced to 1 year and 3 months in prison**, minus the time already spent in custody. However, when he was released from prison in the summer of 1937, he was **immediately rearrested** by the **Gestapo** and this time was sent to **Sachsenhausen concentration camp**. In April 1940 he was transferred to another camp, Flossenbürg, where he remained until April 1945, when he was able to escape before the Nazis evacuated the prisoners. **Apart from a gap in 1935-36, Richard had spent more than a decade in camps or prisons.**

Credit: Holocaust Educational Trust



# Black people

Racism towards black people was common in Europe and America in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Although such prejudices had a long history, they increased in this period with **some people claiming that some racial groups were genetically superior to others.** Some Africans, mainly young men, came to work or study in Germany and they were joined after World War I by others who had served the Germans as soldiers or officials. **Germany's black population included a significant number of people from mixed-race families.** They were usually the children of either German colonialists who had married African women or of white women who had relationships with black people working in Germany. This shows that **racism was not universal.** In fact, although black people often encountered prejudice in the 1920s, **some elements of black culture became popular in Germany, especially jazz music.**

Credit: Holocaust Educational Trust



In major cities such as Berlin black and white musicians (many of them Americans) performed to mainly white audiences. Under Nazi rule black people did face widespread discrimination which **made it difficult to get jobs and they were forbidden to attend university**. Some black people were able to make careers in the entertainment industry, taking small roles in films or performing in travelling circus-style shows of 'traditional African dance and song' which were partly intended to show the supposed 'inferiority' of black culture. A more openly racist policy was followed towards jazz. **Jazz was banned from public radio in 1935** and Nazi propaganda used racist images in an attempt to discredit it. Even though it became increasingly difficult to buy jazz records, some white teenagers, mainly in Hamburg and Berlin, continued to listen to jazz in clubs or their homes. In August 1941 more than 300 of these **Swing Youth** members were arrested; some were eventually sent to **concentration camps** – **essentially for listening to black music!**

Credit: Holocaust Educational Trust



Some black people, mainly American, British and French prisoners of war, also found themselves caught in the Nazi camp system. There is evidence that they were **singled out for mistreatment or even murder by camp guards**. In addition, some black soldiers were used as **slave labourers by the German army**. In 1943, a group of black German men were also sent to a labour camp near Berlin. Many of them had actually been **conscripted** for the army but had been rejected because of their colour; instead they were **made to work as slaves for 72 hours a week**.

Credit: Holocaust Educational Trust



**Theodor Wonja Michael** was born into a mixed race family in Berlin on 15th January 1925. His father **Theophilus** had come to Germany from Cameroon in the hope of studying but, like many Africans in Germany, had **only been able to find work in travelling circus style shows which treated black people as 'exotic' entertainment.** Nonetheless, **Theophilus** settled down and married **Martha Wegner**, a white German woman. **Theodor** was the youngest of their four children. Martha died in 1926, when Theodor was still a baby, so the children were brought up by **Theophilus's** circus colleagues and were trained as performers from an early age. After **Theophilus** died in 1934, **Theodor's siblings moved to France.** They **lost their German citizenship when German officials in Paris confiscated the passport of Theodor's brother James, telling him that 'Black Germans do not exist'.** **Theodor** was only reunited with his brother and his sister **Juliana** in the 1960s; he never saw his other sister **Christiana** again – she died of pneumonia in France.

Credit: Holocaust Educational Trust



**Theodor** chose to remain in Germany, even though **Nazi racist policies were making life increasingly difficult for mixed race children**. After leaving school in 1939, he worked as a porter (welcoming guests and carrying their luggage) in a Berlin hotel but was soon **sacked after a guest complained about his skin colour**. He struggled to get other jobs because he was **not allowed to join the German Labour Front** (the Nazi workers' organisation). **Theodor** was **conscripted** for the German army but was **rejected because of his colour**. Instead, in early 1943, **he was sent with other Afro-Germans to a forced labour camp** near Berlin where they **worked in a weapons' factory for two years** until the end of the war. **Theodor** later said that his greatest fear in the camp was falling ill – he feared that in hospital he might be **sterilised** as mixed race children from the Rhineland area had been.

Credit: Holocaust Educational Trust



# Roma people

**'Gypsies' was the name used by the Nazis for the Roma people.** They typically travelled from place to place and it is estimated that there were around **26,000 'gypsies' in Germany in the early 1930s.** The Nazis believed that Gypsies were **a threat to the racial purity of Germany and accused them of being 'work-shy.'** While in theory these people were full and equal German citizens, they had also been subjected for some time to discriminatory laws in different areas of the country. **Since 1929, Gypsies were forbidden from roaming the land in large groups, and were required to register with the authorities.** They also faced two years of forced labour if they could not prove that they had been working regularly. **As in other countries, Gypsies in Germany were regarded with hostility and suspicion by a significant proportion of the population** – they were commonly seen as people who avoided work and were often involved in crime. According to the Nazi worldview, Gypsies therefore posed a risk – they were seen not only to threaten **Germany's cultural values and social morals, but also as a danger to the health and purity of the German nation.**

Credit: Holocaust Educational Trust



It was for these reasons that the **Nazis adopted an aggressive attitude** in their treatment of Gypsies. In the immediate years after 1933 the 25-30,000 Gypsies within Nazi Germany found that the established laws discriminating against them were followed even more than previously had been. At a local level, a number of areas implemented new laws and increased levels of harassment; **Gypsies were increasingly vulnerable to raids and arrests.** By the end of the **September 1935, Gypsies were legally defined as having “alien blood”.** After this development, categorising who according to racial criteria was a Gypsy became all the more important to the Nazis. By the outbreak of World War Two, the **Nazis had a database of over 20,000 individuals.** According to the Nazis, although Gypsies originated from the same area as **Aryans**, their blood had been corrupted through migration, meaning that they did pose a threat to Germany. The recommendation was that all Gypsies with mixed blood be **sterilised.**

Credit: Holocaust Educational Trust



In late September 1942, a few hundred Gypsies were deported from Germany with the specific purpose of constructing a new enclosure within **Auschwitz-Birkenau**. This sub-camp was to exclusively house Gypsies. **Living conditions were as atrocious as in the rest of the camp with typhus claiming the lives of many of the total 23,000 Gypsies who were sent to Birkenau.** Many were also **experimented on**, with a significant proportion being **murdered by gas or shooting**. It is not known how many Gypsies lost their lives during the period of the Third Reich, but it is **estimated that around a quarter of the pre-war Gypsy population were killed by the Nazis** and their collaborators; some 220,000.

Credit: Holocaust Educational Trust



**Rita Prigmore** was born on 3rd March 1943 in Wuerzburg, Germany, together with her twin sister **Rolanda**, into a Sinti (Gypsy) family. In 1941, Rita's mother and several other members of her family were taken to the headquarters of the **Gestapo**. **Once there, they were forced to sign forms agreeing to be sterilised**, or else they would be deported. **Theresia** (her mother) agreed, but before she attended her appointment she tried to fall pregnant. Later in the summer 1942 when **Theresia** was called to be **sterilised** the **doctors discovered that she was expecting twins – Rita and Rolanda**. She was told **she would be allowed to give birth if she agreed to give her children to the authorities** once they were born. She agreed, and the family was monitored throughout the pregnancy.

Credit: Holocaust Educational Trust



After their birth, **Rita** and **Rolanda** spent most of their time in a clinic, only being allowed to stay with their parents every now and then. On one occasion the children were released to their parents for the purpose of a **propaganda** photo-shoot, showing the parents happily pushing the children down a street in Wuerzburg. In April 1943, their parents were notified that they would be deported but without **Rita** and **Rolanda**. **Theresia** headed to the university where the children were being kept, and demanded to see them. **She was refused, but after forcing her way in found Rolanda dead with a bandage on her head after being experimented on.** In a panic **she grabbed Rita and ran out of the clinic.** A few days later the authorities caught up with the family and took Rita back to the clinic.

Credit: Holocaust Educational Trust



She remained there for around twelve months, before being released to **Theresia** in April 1944. Soon afterwards the family split up, and Rita stayed with her mother. The pair both survived the war, but as a child and an adult **Rita** started to experience various health problems. On one occasion she even crashed her car after **blacking out**. It was then **discovered that this was linked to various brain experiments that had been conducted on her as a child by Nazi doctors.**

Credit: Holocaust Educational Trust



# How were minority groups treated in Nazi Germany?

	<b>What were Nazi attitudes towards this group?</b>	<b>How were they treated by the Nazis?</b> <i>(Include specific laws/policies where possible)</i>
<b>People with disabilities</b>		
<b>Homosexuals</b>		
<b>Black people</b>		
<b>Roma people - 'Gypsies'</b>		



# Glossary

**Aryan** - People of European descent who are often portrayed as having blond hair, blue eyes, tall and athletic. The Nazis viewed Aryans as the superior race, or 'master race', and believed that Germans were a pure race of Aryan descent but that this race had lost its purity.

**Sterilise/Sterilisation** - Surgery to make someone unable to physically have children.

**T4 Programme** - The organised murder by the state of Germany's physically and mentally disabled.

**Untermenschen** - A term used by the Nazis to refer to races who were inferior or which the Nazis considered to be subhuman. Many Nazis believed that the Aryan race had been contaminated by the subhumans which is why the Aryan race had lost its purity.

