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ARTICLE

The Nuremberg Race Laws

The Nuremberg Laws transformed the definition of Jewish identity from religious to racial, stripping rights and paving the way for the Holocaust.

January 7, 2025



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f *Top Photo: German Nuremberg Law teaching chart that distinguishes the hierarchal difference between German-blooded individuals, Jews, and those in between, distributed in 1936. The chart separates individuals into three "races": German-Blooded, Jews, and Mischling (part Jewish) based on their grandparent's race. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection, Gift of Virginia Ehrbar through Hillel at Kent State University. Accession Number: 1996.113.1*

"I decide who is a Jew." Viennese mayor Karl Lueger, a vicious antisemite who ran an 1895 political platform based almost solely on hatred toward Jews, made this infamous statement in response to a question about why he had Jewish friends.

[\[1\]](#) It captures in horrific succinctness how, by the turn of the 20th century, the label "Jewish" increasingly had little to do with actual religious or ethnic identity, and instead had been transmogrified into a broadly conceived slur hurled at anyone perceived as an "other."

As Darwin-based eugenic thinking caught on in the 1880s and 1890s, many antisemitic ideologues increasingly began proposing that Jews were a race. Race, of course, is a social construct, created entirely by humans to define in-groups and out-groups, but even social constructs have immense power. Georg Ritter von Schönerer, who helped inspire ultranationalist pan-Germanic movements in the late 19th century, believed wholeheartedly that Jews were members of an "alien" race who could never be assimilated into Germany. Attaching nationalism to racial ideology, Schönerer produced widely read propaganda calling for "the elimination of Jewish influence in all fields of public life."[\[2\]](#) He was not alone.

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- ✎ achieve world domination. Just as in other epochs they strove to reach the same goal by other, though inwardly related processes. Their endeavor lies profoundly
- ✎ rooted in their essential nature.”^[3] Such a mythical connection served Hitler’s
- ✎ eastward imperial ambitions all too well to pass up.

THE NUREMBERG LAWS

After becoming chancellor of Germany in January 1933, Hitler and his Nazi colleagues quickly learned that they needed to soft-peddle their antisemitic messaging when a nationwide boycott of Jewish businesses on April 1, 1933, largely failed to gain traction with the general public. Only in 1935, after Hitler had effectively consolidated power by purging external and internal enemies, winning over the support of the *Wehrmacht*’s generals, and combining the office of the president and chancellor into a singular role of *Führer*, did he feel emboldened enough to enact sweeping anti-Jewish legislation.

By all accounts, the Nuremberg Laws were fabricated on a whim. Preparations for the 1935 Nazi Party rally at the parade grounds in Nuremberg were well under way by early September, and the weeklong event was to culminate in Hitler announcing a new “Reich Flag Law,” which would make the party’s swastika banner the German national flag. Hitler also intended to announce that Jews could no longer hoist the flag.

Yet, two days before the scheduled address, Hitler decided he wanted more dramatic legislation. State officials worked into the wee hours scrambling to codify anti-Jewish bills that would seek to define Jews racially. In fact, “several versions of the proposed law, one of which was written on the back of a menu,

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f of *Rassenschande*—“race defilement”—the Nazi fear of miscegenation between
⌘ “Aryans” and “non-Aryans.” The second was the “Reich Citizenship Law,” which
✉ stripped many basic rights of citizenship from Jews and laid the foundation for
 determining who could be classified as a “racial Jew.”

Historian Thomas Childers writes, “it was also symptomatic of Hitler’s *modus operandi* that after firing off a sweeping ideological barrage against the Jews, party and state officials were left to translate his pronouncements into practical policy, and here—again typically—little agreement could be found.”^[5] Nowhere was this more apparent than in defining who exactly was classified as a “Jew” and who was not. By November 1935, Nazi ideologues had drawn up the scientific-looking chart pictured here to explain the Nazi construct of the “racial Jew.”






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-  German Nuremberg Law teaching chart that distinguishes the hierarchal difference between German-blooded individuals, Jews, and those in between, distributed in 1936. The chart separates individuals into three
-  "races": German-Blooded, Jews, and Mischling (part Jewish) based on their grandparent's race. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection, Gift of Virginia Ehrbar through Hillel at Kent State University. Accession
-  Number: 1996.113.1

As shown, if one had three or four Jewish grandparents, one was considered racially Jewish. One or two Jewish grandparents left one in an odd position of being classified as a *Mischling*, or "mixed-breed," an issue that would later be dealt with on a case-by-case basis. Only someone without any Jewish grandparents was categorized as being of German blood. In all, the Nuremberg Laws classified some 502,200 Germans as "full Jews," 70,000 to 75,000 as first-degree *Mischlinge* (two Jewish grandparents), and 125,000 to 130,000 as second-degree *Mischlinge* (one Jewish grandparent).^[6] Everyone else was presumed to be "Aryan."

'SOCIAL DEATH'

The Nuremberg Laws and their classifications along racial lines are striking because, in the words of historian Doris Bergen, "according to Nazi ideology, Jewishness was a racial trait, but in fact there was no way to measure distinctions of blood, because they did not actually exist. There were no reliable markers of appearance, blood type, or any other physical traits that Nazi 'experts' could use to separate Jews from 'Aryans.'"^[7] In other words, Nazi

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- f grandparents born into the Jewish religious community automatically became racial Jews, and that this religious tradition passed to their children and
- ✕ grandchildren—as if such social, ethnic, and cultural practices were inherited in
- ✉ the blood.[8]



Eugenics poster entitled "The Nuremberg Law for the Protection of Blood and German Honor." The illustration is a stylized map of the borders of central Germany on which is imposed a schematic of the forbidden degrees of marriage between Aryans and non-Aryans. United States Holocaust

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- f** the United States, specifically the Jim Crow laws in the South, the Nuremberg Laws found much power in everyday life. For instance, charges of race
- ✕** defilement were very public events, involving “sensational press coverage and
- ✉** open trials. ... Even people who were acquitted found their lives destroyed.” As a result, many broke off relationships or even marriages with Jewish partners, and the general public soon understood the ramifications of associating with Jews.

[9]

Born to a Jewish family in Hamburg, Germany, Holocaust survivor Edward Adler recalled, “I was going with a nice young lady that I had gone with or some time, and we were out camping. ... There was a fellow ... next to us, near us, in another little camp with a tent. ... He wanted to make a date with this young lady that I was going with, and she didn’t want any part of it. He reported me to the Gestapo, and I was arrested for going with a gentile girl. I got six months in prison, solitary confinement in 1935.”[10]

The restrictions guaranteed by the Reich Citizenship Law also led to further marginalization. Jews eventually could no longer own radios or telephones, practice medicine, buy chocolate, or do hundreds of other daily things now reserved for “Aryan” citizens. As historian Doris Bergen writes, “Jewish children were especially hard hit, because they had daily contact with non-Jews at school and on the way there and back.” Many memoirs from children of the period give examples of vicious bullying, harsh treatment in schools, and even being assaulted verbally and physically.[11] Rita Kuhn, who was a child at the time, remembered an incident where German boys asked her to speak in Hebrew to them, which she refused: “They pushed me into a corner and said, ‘We’ll beat

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f as good.' And knowing that I was Jewish, this ... made a very grave impression."[\[13\]](#)



✉ Historian Marion Kaplan has called this process of discrimination followed by marginalization and violent segregation a “social death,” which saw Jewish “subjection, their excommunication from the ‘legitimate social or moral community,’ and their relegation to a perpetual state of dishonor.” Kaplan adds that this social death is a “prerequisite for deportation and genocide,” because “as the regime disenfranchised Jews, robbing them of their economic livelihoods and social integration, many Germans approved and looked on, bolstering, and sometimes preempting, the regime’s cruelties. Well before the physical death of German Jews, the German ‘racial community’—the man and the woman on the street, the real ‘ordinary Germans’—made Jews suffer social death every day.”[\[14\]](#) This constant barrage on Jews helped many Germans internalize the Nazi ideology that suggested Jews were an existential threat, helping to both legitimate and accelerate the violence that directly followed.

Additionally, the Nuremberg Laws paved the way for successive legal measures aimed at other target groups. Sinti and Roma were soon stripped of their rights as German citizens when they were deemed “alien to the Aryan species.” Nazi legislation also criminalized sexual relations between men, stating that “any physical intimacy assumed to lead to sexual arousal could be grounds for prosecution.” And thus, the burden of proof all but disappeared, granting immense power to mere accusations of sexual relationships between men. As a result, thousands were sent to concentration camps.[\[15\]](#)

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- ✎ example, a 1935 law required any pregnant woman who should have been sterilized by a 1933 law but hadn't been, to be forced to have an abortion.[\[16\]](#)
- ✎ Alongside the genocide of the Jews, the Nazis murdered nearly 250,000 disabled people between 1939 and 1945.

BRIDGE TO THE HOLOCAUST

The Nuremberg Laws opened the door to the commission of the Holocaust. As shown in the [“Ten Stages of Genocide Chart”](#) created by President of Genocide Watch's Gregory Stanton, discrimination, dehumanization, and organization are all critical steps toward a society radicalizing toward supporting mass extermination.

In August 1938, for illustration, Jewish parents had to name their babies specific Jewish first names from a government-approved list. Any Jew without an approved first name also had to add an additional first name—“Israel” for men and “Sara” for women—to their legal documents. An October 1938 law required all Jews to have the letter “J” stamped onto their passports. Such measures became even more drastic in 1941 with the passage of a law requiring Jews in Germany to wear a yellow badge in public with the word *Jude*, “Jew,” emblazoned on it.[\[17\]](#)



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A passport issued to Lore Oppenheimer, that was stamped with the letter "J" for "Jude." The name "Sara" was added for all German-Jewish women in accordance with German legislation. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Hans Steinitz. Photograph Number: 01371

Such public identification and othering undoubtedly created the preconditions for mass murder by taking all mental processes of evaluation of individual distinction out of the equation for anyone interacting with Jews in Germany. With the onset of World War II on September 1, 1939, Nazi leadership ordered increasingly violent actions against Jews as Germany expanded its empire across Eastern Europe. [Initially rounding up Jews and segregating them in squalid ghettos throughout Poland](#), the Nazis sought ways to deport Jews from Europe altogether (even considering sending them to the island of Madagascar). With the launch of Operation Barbarossa, Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union, on June 22, 1941, however, the changing wartime landscape encouraged darker "solutions" to the "Jewish problem," resulting in the mass murder by shooting of over 1.5 million Jews on the Eastern Front. From there, Nazi leaders decided to deport the millions trapped in ghettos to static death camps where they were

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protected as citizens of the German nation. Afterward, however, Jews were no longer citizens but remained subjects of the German government. Thus, while they were no longer guaranteed protections and rights granted to citizens by their governments, that same government controlled their very fate. As Hannah Arendt famously observed, “We became aware of the existence of a right to have rights ... and a right to belong to some kind of organized community, only when millions of people emerged who had lost and could not regain these rights.”^[18] Historically, this position of being “stateless subjects” without rights creates the preconditions to justify dehumanization, deportation, and genocide—a process that began in earnest with the passage of the Nuremberg Laws.

▼ References and Footnotes:



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