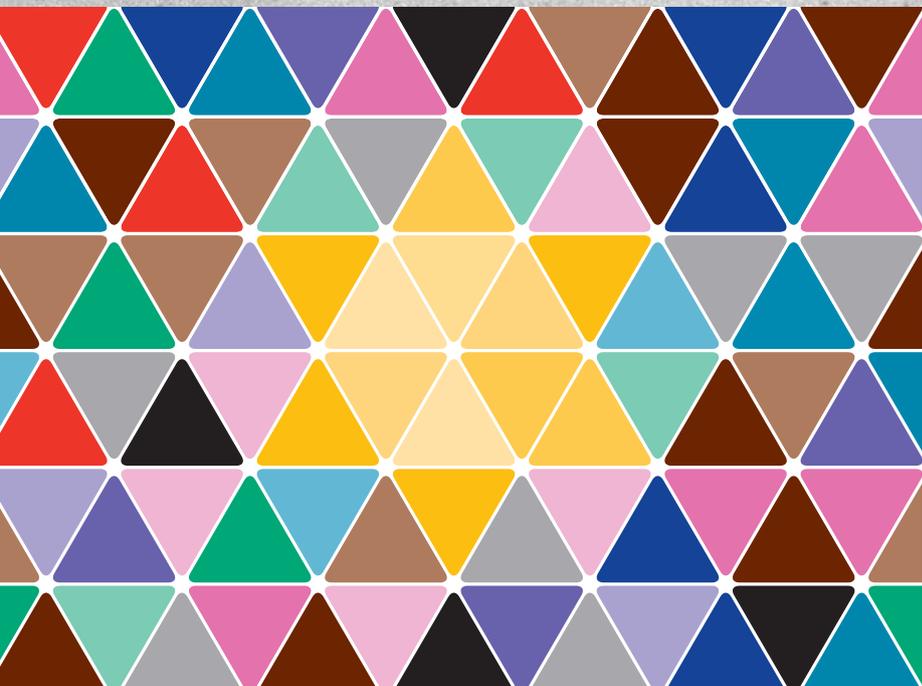


Persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses



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Mosaic – Victims of Nazi Persecution



Persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses

Jehovah's Witnesses are members of a religious group which was founded in the USA in the 1870s by Charles Taze Russell. Originally calling themselves Bible Students, they took the name Jehovah's Witnesses in 1931. In the late 19th century the movement began missionary work outside America and branches were soon established in a number of countries, including Germany. It is estimated that there were at least 20,000 Jehovah's Witnesses in Germany by the early 1930s.

Witnesses see themselves as servants of God rather than of any earthly authority and, as a result, they refuse to serve in national armies, salute national flags or sing national anthems. They generally refuse to vote or to take part in politics. These ideas have often brought them into conflict with governments and with other religious groups.

Although the Witnesses regard themselves as Christians, in the early 20th century other churches frequently saw them as heretics who rejected a number of traditional Christian beliefs and practices such as observance of Christmas and Easter. The missionary work of the Witnesses – knocking on people's doors and preaching to them – also caused some hostility. As a result, they faced prejudice and legal restrictions in a number of countries including Canada and some states of the USA.

However, although the Witnesses were often marginalised and ridiculed, open persecution was generally relatively limited. In Germany, a number of states had tried to stop their missionary work and to ban their publications but the German courts often sided with the Witnesses on the grounds of freedom of religion. This all changed when the Nazis came to power. Even though the Witnesses represented less than 0.1% of the German population, the Nazis saw them as a challenge to their authority and therefore subjected them to increasingly severe persecution.

The Nazis argued that the Jehovah's Witnesses were enemies of Germany because of their links to other countries, especially the United States, and because some of their beliefs drew on Jewish traditions. However, the same could be said for many other religious groups which were not persecuted by the Nazis. Much more important was the fact that, unlike most Christians, the Witnesses were not willing to accept the authority of the state. They refused to swear loyalty to the Nazi regime, raise their arms in the Hitler salute, join Nazi-controlled organisations such as the German Labour Front and the Hitler Youth, or take part in Nazi parades and rallies. The Witnesses argued that

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these actions were not anti-Nazi but simply reflected their religious beliefs which said that they should not be involved in politics. However, for the Nazis every area of life was political so a refusal to participate in the new German society was seen as an attack on Nazism.

The Nazis responded with increasingly bitter persecution. Soon after the Nazis came to power in 1933, a number of German states banned the Witnesses and their publications. The Gestapo (secret police) compiled a list of people in Germany who were believed to be Jehovah's Witnesses and regularly raided their homes to search for illegal literature. Witnesses who carried out missionary work were arrested whilst others were sacked from their jobs or lost their pensions and social security benefits.

The persecution intensified after Hitler reintroduced military conscription in 1935 because Witnesses refused to serve in the German army. The first nationwide wave of arrests took place in 1936 and the Gestapo began to use torture against the prisoners. However, these actions failed to destroy the movement: instead of giving in to the Nazis, Witnesses continued to practise their faith. They not only carried on with their meetings but even delivered their publications to Nazi Party headquarters!

This failure further enraged the Nazi leadership. As a result, increasing numbers of Witnesses were arrested and tried before special courts for 'crimes' such as refusing to join the army or give the Hitler salute. It is estimated that around 10,000 Witnesses in Germany were imprisoned during the Nazi period with sentences ranging from one month to several years. Their children were also persecuted: they were ridiculed by their

classmates and teachers for their refusal to sing patriotic songs or join the Hitler Youth, and often expelled from school. In a number of cases, younger children were taken from their parents and sent to orphanages or boarding schools.

Between 2,000 and 2,500 of the imprisoned German Witnesses were sent to concentration camps along with at least 700 from other countries (mainly Austria and the Netherlands). In the camps, they were marked out with purple triangles on their uniforms. They were often put in particularly harsh blocks in an attempt to break their spirit but this failed. Unlike other groups who were sent to the camps, the Witnesses were given the opportunity to leave immediately simply by signing a document denouncing their faith but hardly any did this. Instead, the Witnesses continued to meet and pray in the camps and even tried to convert other prisoners. They sustained themselves through their faith and the support that they gave to each other. In fact, some Nazis (including the SS leader Himmler) were impressed by what they saw as the 'fanaticism' of the Witnesses and they came to see them as 'trustworthy' prisoners because of their refusal to escape or physically resist. As a result, Witnesses were often used as servants by camp officers and guards.

However, the losses suffered by Jehovah's Witnesses in the Nazi camps were heavy. Around 1,400 of them (including a majority of the foreign Witnesses) lost their lives in the concentration camps whilst others died after their release as a result of the maltreatment they had suffered during their imprisonment. A similar number died in prison. A further 250 German Witnesses were executed for refusing to serve in the army.

Further materials will become available through the course of this joint project.

For further information go to

National Union of Teachers

www.teachers.org.uk and

Holocaust Educational Trust

www.het.org.uk

