# Historical background: Germany

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Germany looks back on a long Jewish history, which was violently broken by National Socialism and the Shoah.[1] The life of Jews in the Middle Ages was characterized by economic and social exclusion. It was not until 1871 that Jews were recognized as equal citizens in the German Reich. At the beginning of the 20th century, especially in the 1920s, many Jews immigrated to Berlin, fleeing poverty and anti-Semitism from Poland, Russia and Ukraine. During the First World War (1914-1918), German Jews fought side by side and in equal proportion to the population as non-Jewish Germans for Germany's victory. World War I was followed by the Weimar Republic, in which Walther Rathenau, a German Jew, became Reich Foreign Minister in 1922. He was assassinated by right-wing extremists only a few months after his inauguration.

German defeat in World War I was followed by a world economic crisis, after which antisemitism increased in Germany. In June 1933, there were about 500,000 Jews living in the Weimar Republic, most of them in large cities. When the National Socialists were elected to power in Germany in 1933, according to their ideology, they blamed Jews for Germany's mistakes and the poor economic and social situation after the defeat in the First World War. This wave of antisemitism was not entirely new: for a long time, Jews were blamed for diseases, the social imbalance in society and for the murder of Christians in the myths of blood libel. Gradually, laws were introduced that excluded Jews from society and disenfranchised them. As early as 1933, numerous laws regulated the exclusion of Jews from certain professions and from public and cultural life. In 1935, the Nuremberg Laws distinguished between "Aryan" citizens of the Reich and Jewish citizens. In the November pogroms beginning on November 9, 1938, not only did nearly all the synagogues in the Reich go up in flames, but tens of thousands of Jewish men were also taken to the concentration camps of Dachau, Buchenwald, and Sachsenhausen, and over 100 of them were murdered.

The November pogroms of 1938 finally showed German Jews that they no longer had a future in National Socialist Germany. A last great wave of emigration followed. However, not everyone succeeded: Difficult immigration conditions in countries such as the USA and the British Mandate Territory of Palestine (from 1948 Israel) made it impossible to flee Germany, especially for destitute people. In addition, the Nazis forced the Jewish population to surrender their assets and property upon emigration. On September 1, 1939, the German Wehrmacht and the SS invaded Poland. With the invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, the Germans began to carry out and organize the Holocaust on a larger scale. While German task forces were murdering Jewish people in the USSR, the first deportations to concentration camps began in Poland and Slovakia. In October 1941, the first deportation train left Berlin for the Litzmannstadt ghetto (now Lodz in Poland). In total, about 6 million European Jews were murdered. Half of them were Polish, about 165,000 German Jews.

At the time of liberation by the Allied armies in May 1945, there were about 20,000 Jewish Germans on German territory - the territory of the later four Allied occupation zones. Most of them had survived in "privileged mixed marriages" - that is, protected by marriage to a non-Jewish person - or in hiding. Immediately after the liberation, they made efforts to rebuild community life: The Jewish Community of Berlin was officially reestablished in the summer of 1945. The community played an important role in providing for the Jewish displaced persons, i.e. people who had been torn from

[1] Shoah is the Jewish self-designation for the Nazi genocide of European Jews, also referred to as the Holocaust. The word Holocaust is the most common term internationally. Unlike the term Holocaust, however, the term Shoah comes from the Hebrew ("destruction" or "catastrophe"). It is therefore often preferred as a designation.

their homeland by flight and deportation. They came mostly from Poland and Hungary. In search of emigration to Palestine or the USA, they first arrived in Allied-occupied Germany. Only about 30,000 of the Jewish DPs remained in Germany.

In divided Germany, Jews left their mark on both the German Democratic Republic and the Federal Republic. However, Jewish life took place in the shadow of the Shoah. In front of the international Jewish community, Jews had to justify their whereabouts or their return to the "land of the perpetrators”. They also tended to be unpopular in the German community: after National Socialism, non-Jewish Germans wanted to forget rather than be reminded of those who had been murdered and of their own guilt. In both German states, Jews had to fight for compensation payments. In the socialist GDR, compensation depended on how politically straightforward one was. The first political and social organization to emerge here was the Bund für die Opfer des Faschismus (Association for the Victims of Fascism), which was supposed to represent the welfare and compensation claims of the former political and racial persecutees. In the FRG, self-help was at the center of Jewish self-organization, which was decisively shaped by women: In 1953, Jeannette Wolff, Lilli Marx and Ruth Galinski founded the "Jewish Women's Federation" in West Germany, which still exists today and supports survivors of the Shoah.

In the 1990s, 200,000 Jews from the former Soviet Union came to Germany as so-called contingent refugees: they were invited by the German state to revive the formerly flourishing Jewish life in Germany and had to be recognized by the Jewish communities. Thus, they were unspokenly given the task of contributing to Germany's moral reparation, while their admission was presented as humanitarian.