

Aktion Reinhard

Code name for the Nazi operation to exterminate the 2,284,000 Jews living in the five districts of the *generalgouvernement*, including the Warsaw, Lublin, Radom, Cracow, and Lvov districts. During the last few months of 1942 the operation was extended to the Bialystok district, adding some 210,000 Jews. *Aktion Reinhard* was named after Reinhard Heydrich, the main organizer of the "Final Solution" in Europe, who had been assassinated by Czech resistance fighters.

The Nazis began planning *Aktion Reinhard* in the fall of 1941. SS chief Heinrich Himmler appointed Odilo Globocnik (SS and Police Leader of the Lublin district) to head up *Aktion Reinhard*, and SS-*Hauptsturmfuehrer* Hans Hofle as chief of operations. They were assigned a staff of 450 Germans, including 92 men who had previously worked for the Euthanasia Program. In addition, the *Aktion Reinhard* headquarters recruited a special unit made up of Ukrainian volunteers, most of whom had been Soviet prisoners of war.

Three extermination camps were established for *Aktion Reinhard*: Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka. Belzec, situated along the Lublin-Lvov railway, was constructed between November 1941 and March 1942. The extermination process began there on March 17, 1942. Sobibor, located east of Lublin, was built in March and April 1942, and was opened for operations in early May 1942. Treblinka, located 50 miles northeast of Warsaw, was set up in June and July 1942 and began functioning on July 23, 1942—in conjunction with the mass deportation of Jews from the Warsaw ghetto.

The Nazis set up a deportation process that they used unwaveringly in most parts of Eastern Europe. Their main goal was to keep the victims in the dark about where they were going until they got there. In the smaller ghettos, the Nazis carried out this process in just one or two days. In the large ghettos, which sometimes contained hundreds of thousands of Jews, the deportation could not be carried out in one day only. Thus, the *Judenrat* would be instructed to gather several thousand people each in several smaller *aktionen*. If the *Judenrat* could not or would not provide the Germans with the number of people they had asked for, German and Ukrainian troops would be sent in to

break into the houses and courtyards where the Jews were hiding and drag them out.

After being removed from the ghetto, the Jews were marched to a railroad station, where they were jammed into cattle cars. The trip to the extermination camp sometimes only took a few hours, but often took days. The long trip and the insufferable conditions in the train cars (including overcrowding, terrible heat in the summer months and cold in the winter, and lack of water or sanitation) resulted in many people dying en route.

In July 1942 Himmler visited the *Aktion Reinhard* camps. Afterwards, he ordered that the deportation of the *Generalgouvernement's* Jews was to be completed by December 31 of that year. However, the army appealed his order, citing its need for Jewish manpower for the war effort. As a result, it was decided to keep some Jewish laborers in several of the large ghettos for the time being.

During *Aktion Reinhard* the Germans confiscated huge amounts of Jewish property, worth more than 178 million reichsmarks. The cash and valuables gathered in the extermination camps were sent to the SS Economic-Administrative Main Office (*Wirtschafts-Verwaltungshauptamt, WVHA*), while other items were spread out among the Economy Ministry, the army, SS workshops, and the ethnic Germans (*Volksdeutsche*) living in the occupied territories.

Aktion Reinhard continued until early November 1943, when the last *Generalgouvernement* Jews in the Majdanek, Poniatowa, and Trawniki camps were exterminated as part of Operation Erntefest. Altogether, more than two million Jews in the *Generalgouvernement* were killed during *Aktion Reinhard*.