Soviet Union

Conglomeration of countries extending from Eastern Europe to Eastern Asia. Prior to World War II, about 3 million Jews lived in the Soviet Union. About one-million of them were murdered in the Holocaust.

Following Hitler's rise to power, Germany and the Soviet Union behaved as mortal enemies. One month prior to the outbreak of World War II, however, the two countries surprised the world by signing a "non-aggression pact" (Nazi-Soviet Pact), in which they agreed to abstain from attacking each other. This pact allowed the Germans free reign to invade Poland without Soviet intervention. In exchange, the Soviets were given the eastern parts of Poland and the Baltic countries of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia. Over the next year the Soviets also annexed Bessarabia and Bukovina, which had been under Romanian rule since World War I. Altogether, these new territories had a Jewish population of about 2 million. Additionally, about 250,000—300,000 Jewish refugees from German-occupied western Poland had fled to the Soviet Union after the war broke out. Jewish populations in these territories did not live under the best conditions but at this point, they were spared the systematic extermination suffered by Jews under the Germans.

The relatively good status of Jews in the Soviet Union did not last long. In mid-1941 the Germans decided to betray their pact with the Soviets and secretly planned to attack the Soviet Union in Operation "Barbarossa." In preparation for their invasion, the Nazis ordered the extermination of all Jews living in those areas annexed by the Soviet Union in 1939--1940. The Germans attacked on June 22, 1941. After the invasion, more than 5 million Jews came under Nazi rule, constituting over half of Europe's Jewish population. *Einsatzgruppen* followed the advancing army and with assistance from local collaborators and various police and regular army (Wehrmacht) units, they quickly massacred most of the Jews of the Baltic States, Belorussia, and the Ukraine by shooting into open pits. The remaining Jews were put into ghettos, and most were murdered within 12--18 months.

The German army quickly overran the Soviet Union, which was unprepared for the onslaught. The Soviet people began to flee eastward, away from the advancing army. Those Jews who fled, had a much better chance of avoiding extermination. However, most Jews could not escape, as choices were limited. The Nazis considered the killing of the Jews within the pre-1939 Soviet Union to be a military priority. As the Nazis occupied a new area, they would begin the extermination of its Jewish population and finish the job within 2 to 3 months, at most.

The destruction of the Jewish communities in the Soviet Union was carried out in different ways. Generally, the German occupiers appointed a Judenrat with 3 or 4 members who were important members of the Jewish community. A few days later, the Jews were ordered to register with this council, and within a few more days or weeks, they were ordered to appear at a certain spot in town, from which they would be leaving, supposedly, for a labor camp or for Palestine. When they arrived, Germans and local Jew-haters would beat them and shoot anyone who protested or walked slowly. The Jews were then led to nearby pits where they were to be killed. Just before the spot, they were split into groups and made to undress. Then the Jews were forced into the pits and fired at from all directions by Nazis with machine guns. After one group was exterminated, another would follow. In some cases the Nazis immediately rounded up and shot the Jews, without the aforementioned procedure. In other cases, Jews were put into lightly guarded ghettos and forced to wear the Jewish badge, while the young, skilled workers would be put to hard labor outside the ghetto. These ghettos generally lasted no more than a few weeks or months---the Jews were soon taken out and shot. Sometimes, an area's Jewish population was forced into a temporary concentration camp and forced to wear the Jewish badge. They would then be massacred by the thousands at nearby sites (see also Badge, Jewish).

After the Jewish populations of the Soviet Union were exterminated, the Germans continued to hunt for the few who had escaped and hidden. Those that were found were immediately shot. Very few non-Jews were willing to risk their lives to help Jews as they knew that they too would be punished by

death. Many non-Jews collaborated with the Nazis and took part in the mass murders.

Organized Jewish resistance activity in the Soviet Union was limited mostly to the territory annexed from Poland in 1939. Since the Russian Revolution, the existence of all Jewish organizations was forbidden in the Soviet Union, so they did not have a basic structure for cooperation. Furthermore, the murders took place so quickly that the Jews had no time to band together against the Nazis. In addition, hundreds of thousands of Jewish men were away serving in the Russian army (many Jews who had been drafted distinguished themselves in the army; more than 160,000 won military awards), and thus were simply not around to coordinate resistance against the Germans. The only major possibility for resistance was to escape and join the Russian Partisans. About 10,000 Jews fought in that way. Some families also escaped to the forests and established family camps.

At the end of 1942, the Soviets' luck turned with their victory over the Germans at Stalingrad. Over the next 2 years, they took back lands, which had been occupied by the German army. For political reasons, Stalin established the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, which became the first representative body of the Soviet Jews since the revolution. However, Jews returning to their homes in the Soviet Union were met with destruction, antisemitism, and news that their neighbors had collaborated with the Nazis. They quickly realized that the Soviet boast of having destroyed antisemitism was fiction. This led to a growth of Jewish identity and interest---a force that eventually led to the mass immigration of Soviet Jewry to destinations the world over.