

Ghetto

A street or city section where only Jews lived. The word ghetto was first used in Venice in 1516, as part of the phrase "Geto Nuovo," meaning "New Foundry." This referred to the closed Jewish section of the city, which had originally been the site of a foundry. During World War II the Jews of Eastern Europe were forced to leave their homes and move to ghettos where they were held essentially as prisoners.

Many Jews died in the ghetto. However, there is no proof that the ghettos were originally created for the distinct purpose of killing Jews, or that as the war continued, the Nazis tried to turn the ghettos into sites at which they could carry out their plan to decimate the Jews of Europe. Nevertheless, the Germans were not troubled by the huge number of Jews dying from hunger and lack of other basics.

There is also no evidence that the Nazi leadership themselves ordered the establishment of ghettos in the exact form they eventually took. Even on September 21, 1939, when Reinhard Heydrich called for the centralization of Polish Jews into separate areas of cities and used the term ghetto, he did not mean it in the way it was ultimately carried out. Most likely, ghettos were instituted separately by local officials. Thus, each ghetto was unique in how and when it was set up, how it was sealed off from the rest of the city, and how it was governed.

The first ghetto in Poland was established in the city of Piotrkow Trybunalski in October 1939, just a month after the war broke out. Next, a ghetto was closed off in the city of Lodz on April 30, 1940. The largest ghetto in Europe, the Warsaw Ghetto, was set up in November 1940. Only four months later, in March 1941, the population of the Warsaw Ghetto reached an all-time high of 445,000. In other areas, ghettos were only instituted later on. For example, the ghettos of Silesia (in what is now southwest Poland) were established at the end of 1942 and beginning of 1943. In the parts of the Soviet Union occupied by the Germans, ghettos were usually set up after some of the local Jews had been murdered. Ghettos were also constructed in Hungary, Amsterdam, and Theresienstadt.

Each ghetto was closed off and guarded in its own particular way. The Lodz Ghetto was set off from the rest of the city by a wooden fence and barbed wire. In some spots, a brick wall was also built. Guards stood on both the inside and outside of the line dividing the ghetto from the outside. The Warsaw Ghetto was surrounded by an 11-mile wall. Guards patrolled the wall and were posted at its gates. However, it was possible to smuggle food and other items into the ghetto. The Piotrkow Trybunalski Ghetto did not have a fence or guards. Poles could go in and out of the ghetto freely, and Jews were allowed to leave the ghetto. It was only locked at the end of 1941. In October of that year, Hans Frank, the head of the *Generalgouvernement*, ordered the execution of any Jew found outside the ghetto area without permission to be there. Furthermore, most ghettos were locked during deportations.

Each ghetto was also governed uniquely. Because the ghetto was actually a type of city-within-a-city, the Jews were forced to run services and institutions for themselves for which they had no previous experience. In addition to running the *Judenraete*, which were established before the ghettos and were a separate entity, Jews in the ghetto ran postal services, police forces, and various other services that a city would normally provide. They were also compelled to distribute food rations, and arrange for housing, health care, and jobs. Sometimes, a ghetto was divided into two separate areas: one for the workers, and one for the rest of the population. Some ghettos also contained other types of refugees besides Jews. For example, at one point, Gypsies were held in the Lodz Ghetto.

Jews living in the ghettos of the east obtained food in two different ways: from official German sources, and from the unofficial black market. Officially, the Jews were given ration cards that allowed them to buy much less than the rest of the local population. By mid-1941, in Poland, the Germans were giving out ration cards that provided only 184 calories per day—7.5 percent of the minimum daily requirement. The Germans themselves received a full ration, while the Poles received a ration of 26 percent of the daily needs. In order to supplement the pitiful rations, the Jews were forced to pay exorbitant prices for food sold on the black market. However, most of the Jews had very little money, so many starved to death. Only wealthy Jews could afford to buy on

the black market. Some Jews who worked in German factories received food on the job.

In some cases, the Germans used different names to refer to the areas in which they forced the Jews to live. Mostly, they used the common term, ghetto. However, sometimes they called those areas "Judischer Wohnbezirk," meaning Jewish residential sections.

Soon after the "Final Solution" began, the Germans began to eliminate the ghettos. The first ghettos were liquidated in the spring of 1942. The last Polish ghetto to be destroyed, Lodz, was emptied in the summer of 1944. Most of the Jews taken from the ghettos were deported to Extermination Camps where they were murdered. Only a small number were taken to Concentration Camps and Forced Labor camps near the end of the war. Almost all of the Jews of Eastern Europe had been forced to leave their homes for the ghettos of their cities and towns. By the end of the war, however, not one Eastern European ghetto was left in existence. In Hungary, where the last ghettos were established in 1944, most existed for only a few weeks pending the deportation of the Jews to Auschwitz. In January 1945 when Pest was being conquered by Soviet forces, the Budapest Ghetto became the only ghetto to be liberated.