



## Poland

Country located in Eastern Europe. On September 1, 1939 Germany attacked Poland, launching World War II. Poland's allies, Great Britain and France, immediately declared war on Germany. Despite this, Poland fell to the Germans in just weeks, its capital, Warsaw, capitulating on September 28.

A Polish Government-in-Exile was quickly established in France (when France fell to the German army in mid-1940, the Government-in-Exile moved to London). This government, represented in Poland by the underground Delegatura and the Polish National Council, continued to wage war against Germany for the duration of World War II.

According to the terms of the Nazi–Soviet Pact, signed in August 1939, Germany and the Soviet Union eagerly divided up the newly-conquered Poland: Germany annexed the western third to the Reich, a region including 600,000 Jews, the Soviet Union annexed the eastern third to its Soviet republics of Belorussia and the Ukraine, adding 1.2 million Jews to its population, and the middle third was put under the control of a German civil administration, called the *Generalgouvernement*. Approximately 1.5 million Jews found themselves under the *Generalgouvernement's* jurisdiction.

The Nazis agenda for Poland was to transform it into Lebensraum ("living space") for Germans. To do so, it was essential to control Polish society and its population. Thus, some two million Poles with German blood were given special privileges, whilst the remainder of the Polish population was treated with great brutality and suppression. Many Poles were displaced in order to make room for ethnic Germans (*Volksdeutsche*), while leaders of the Polish people and resisters were killed, often in Nazi camps. A broad resistance movement in Poland took the form of an underground state. Contact from Poland was maintained with the Polish Government-in-Exile in London. The two largest armed resistance organizations in Poland were the Home Army and the Home Guard (see also Home Guard, Poland).

The most defining feature of the history of Polish Jewry under the Nazis is the emergence of the "Final Solution." This history must be viewed as two distinct



periods - before and after the start of the murders. Immediately after the Germans occupied Poland, the country's Jews were subjected to a two-month wave of random murders. After the Germans and Soviets carved up Poland, some 300,000 Jews fled to the Soviet-occupied region from the German areas, leaving 1.8-2 million Jews in German-ruled Poland.

Among the first sets of official anti-Jewish measures in Poland, was that issued by Gestapo chief Reinhard Heydrich on September 21, 1939: he demanded that the Jews living in areas annexed to the Reich be expelled to the *Generalgouvernement*, that they be concentrated in large cities near major railroad junctions, and that *Judenraete* be established. In late fall, the governor of the *Generalgouvernement*, Hans Frank, decreed that in his jurisdiction all Jews over the age of 10 must wear a white armband with a blue Star of David (see also Badge, Jewish). In October he issued a decree whereby all Jewish males of a certain age could be sent to do forced labor. In addition, the Nazis commenced seizing and liquidating Jewish businesses with the exception of small shops. Jews were only allowed to keep small amounts of money, making it difficult to buy or sell anything. In January 1940, Jews were forbidden to use trains, except by special permit and were ordered to register their property with the authorities. Many Jews were attacked, robbed, rounded up randomly and made to do various jobs.

The first Polish Ghetto was established in October 1939, in Piotrkow Trybunalski. The first large ghetto, in the city of Lodz, was decided on in February 1940 and was closed off from the outside world in May 1940. The establishment of Ghettos was accelerated; Warsaw in November, 1940, Lublin and Cracow in March, 1941 and in the Zaglembe region, as late as 1942 and 1943, after mass extermination had commenced.

In some ghettos, Jews had the ability to leave, thus assisting them in smuggling food and supplies. Other ghettos were hermetically sealed, letting no one in or out - subjecting the Jews to starvation and epidemics. Jews in all the ghettos, however, were determined to survive. The *Judenraete* and Jewish community organizations tried their hardest to procure and distribute food and medicine to the ghetto population, provide some semblance of schooling for the children, and cultural activities for all. *Zegota* (the Polish



Council for Aid to Jews), the Jewish Self-Help Organization, the Youth Movement and political undergrounds all strove to help their fellow Jews survive, both physically and emotionally.

In June 1941, Germany turned on its ally the Soviet Union, and began a massive invasion. The Germans created a new territorial district called Bialystok, and accorded it a status similar to that of the Polish areas that were previously incorporated into the Reich. Other areas taken from the Soviet Union by Germany became part of the *Reichskommissariat Ukraine* and the *Reichskommissariat Ostland* administrations. German mobile killing units called *Einsatzgruppen* immediately embarked upon the mass extermination of the Jews living in the newly conquered areas.

Just months after the slaughter began in the Soviet Union, the Germans launched a mass murder campaign in Poland. Chelmno was established on December 7, 1941 -the first of 6 Extermination Camps on Polish soil. During the spring of 1942, three other extermination camps began to function - Sobibor, Belzec, and Treblinka - as part of *Aktion Reinhard*, the plan to liquidate all Jews in the *Generalgouvernement*. Additionally, the Concentration Camps at Auschwitz and Majdanek were expanded to function as extermination centers. Those Jews who had been interned in ghettos were now sent to their deaths in these camps. The liquidation of ghettos in the *Generalgouvernement* continued throughout 1943, and by summer 1944 only the Lodz Ghetto remained.

The Germans did not immediately kill all the Jews, as they wanted to exploit Jewish slave labor for the war economy. In early 1943 some 250,000 Jews were kept as slave laborers in the *Generalgouvernement*. However the killing continued, and by late 1944, when SS chief Heinrich Himmler ordered a halt to the murders in Auschwitz, only tens of thousands of Jews were left.

Some 90% of Polish Jewry, about three million, were murdered by the Nazis; approximately three million non-Jewish Poles, soldiers and civilians, also met their deaths during the war.