

Alsace-Lorraine

Two provinces located in northeastern France that share a border with Germany. For centuries, Alsace-Lorraine was a major topic of conflict between France and Germany, as both countries claimed the region as its own. Alsace-Lorraine belonged to France during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; from 1871–1918 it was controlled by Germany. In 1919, after World War I, the area was returned to France. For most of World War II Germany again held control; after the Allies re-conquered France in the fall of 1944, Alsace-Lorraine reverted to France.

In 1939 there were 20,000 Jews living in Alsace-Lorraine. The largest Jewish community was in Strasbourg; the second largest in Metz.

After the Munich Conference of September 1938 there were riotous demonstrations in Alsace-Lorraine, during which Jewish shops were attacked. In addition, Strasbourg soon became a center for distribution of antisemitic propaganda that was smuggled in by Nazi Party members. In response, Jewish youth movements in the city established a committee to deal with such antisemitism. At the same time, Jewish relief organizations were also established in Strasbourg in order to aid the Jewish refugees from central and eastern Europe who were seeking shelter in the city.

World War II began in September 1939. At that point, the French government evacuated the people living in areas very close to Germany, such as Alsace-Lorraine. Among the evacuees were 14,000 Jews, who were sent to central-western France. After Germany invaded and conquered northern France in mid-1940, another 5,000 Jews from Alsace-Lorraine escaped to southern France. The Germans expelled the rest of the Jews of Alsace-Lorraine in July, and declared the region "Jew-free." Later on in the war, a German professor in Strasbourg, August Hirt, began a collection of Jewish skulls and skeletons in order to study racial theory. In June 1943 nearly 100 Jews were transferred from Auschwitz to a concentration camp in Alsace-Lorraine, where they were gassed. Their corpses were then sent to Hirt to be studied.

Many of the Jews from Alsace-Lorraine who had been evacuated or evicted became active members of the French Jewish resistance. Approximately 2,000 Alsace-Lorraine Jews perished in the Holocaust.