

Bessarabia

Region in Eastern Europe that today covers parts of Moldova and the Ukraine. Bessarabia was governed by Romania from the end of World War I until 1940, at which time about 200,000 Jews were living there. In June 1940 the Soviet Union took Bessarabia in accordance with the terms of the Nazi-Soviet Pact. However, when Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, Bessarabia was once again awarded to Germany's ally, Romania.

The Romanian dictator, Ion Antonescu, immediately called for the "cleansing" of Bessarabia. This translated into the extermination of all Jews living in villages, and the compression of city Jews into Ghettos. Romanian police and soldiers took part in the annihilation of Bessarabian Jewry. The deputy prime minister, Mihai Antonescu, instituted a special unit to kill Jews. Along with German army units and an *Einsatzgruppe* unit, the "Special Echelon" murdered more than 150,000 Jews between July and August 1941.

In August 1941 the Romanian and German authorities began setting up ghettos and camps for the remaining Jews of Bessarabia. Most of these camps were constructed on sites where thousands of Jews had already been killed, or in the ruined Jewish quarters of the cities of Bessarabia, including Balti, Soroca, Kishinev, and Khotin.

At the beginning of September 1941, 64,176 Jews were still left in Bessarabia; by the end of the month, there were only 43,397. The other 20,000 had mostly been deported, along with Jews from Bukovina, to Transnistria, an area in the Ukraine also under Romanian rule. Almost all of the remaining 43,000 Jews were also deported to Transnistria and in all, about 25,000 Jews died just during the period of deportations: the authorities moved them around for an entire month, without any specific destination or purpose other than to cause the deaths of as many Jews as possible. Anyone who could not keep up with the others was shot by the Romanian guards on the spot. Those that finally arrived in Transnistria were either killed or made to do forced labor.

By May 1942, only 227 Jews were left in Bessarabia. The region was liberated by Soviet troops in August 1944 and made part of the Soviet Union.

