

Estonia

The northernmost and the smallest of the three Baltic states. On the eve of World War II, there were 4,500 Jews in Estonia, out of a total population of more than one million.

Estonia was an independent country between the two world wars and again since 1991. In August 1940 the Soviets took control of the country as a result of the Nazi-Soviet Pact. However, when the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union in mid-1941, they entered and conquered Estonia. The Germans included it in *Reichskommissariat Ostland*, an administrative area that encompassed the Baltic states and Belorussia, but allowed an extreme nationalistic Estonian movement to rule the country.

Before the war, about half of Estonia's Jews lived in the capital city, Tallinn, while the rest lived in large towns. They were considered to be an important Estonian minority, and were allowed a certain amount of self-rule. When the Soviets took control of Estonia in 1940, however, the right of self-rule was taken away from the Jews and many were arrested. When the Germans arrived, many Jews fled eastward. Those who had not escaped were immediately treated to harsh restrictions: they were forced to wear the Jewish badge and stripped of their property (see also *Badge, Jewish*). Then the *Einsatzgruppen* arrived and began murdering Jews, with the help of right-wing Estonian units (*Omakaitse*). By October 1941, almost all Jewish males over 16 had been killed. At the January 1942 Wannsee Conference in Berlin, the authorities in charge of Estonia noted that the region was Jew-free.

In the fall of 1942 the Germans began sending tens of thousands of Jews to Estonia from other occupied areas, including Theresienstadt, Vilna, Kovno and camps in Latvia. They were imprisoned in 20 labor camps. Those prisoners too sick to work were killed, while many others died of torture, malnourishment, and disease. By the fall of 1944 the Soviet army was once again advancing towards Estonia; the Germans quickly removed the last Jews from the labor camps and moved them across the Baltic Sea to Stutthof, a Polish Concentration Camp. On September 18--19, 1944, the remainder were killed in the Lagedi and Klooga camps.

Since the end of the 1990s, the Estonian government has tried to document the fate of all Estonian victims of the Nazi period.