



Judenrat

(in plural, *Judenraete*), Jewish councils set up within the Jewish communities of Nazi-occupied Europe on German orders. The *Judenraete* were given the responsibility to implement the Nazis' policies regarding the Jews. These Jewish councils often performed a balancing act: on one hand, they felt a responsibility to help their fellow Jews as much as possible, on the other, they were supposed to carry out the orders of the Nazi authorities - often at the expense of their fellow Jews. The role played by the *Judenraete* is one of the most controversial aspects of the Holocaust period.

The *Judenraete* were not set up in a consistent manner. In some cases a *Judenrat* was responsible for one city only, while in other instances a *Judenrat* or a similar body held authority over an entire district. Sometimes jurisdiction was maintained over a whole country as in; Germany, France, Belgium, The Netherlands, Slovakia, Romania, and the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. The first *Judenraete* were established in occupied Poland in the fall of 1939, just weeks after World War II broke out - on orders issued by Gestapo head Reinhard Heydrich and implemented by Generalgouvernement head Han Frank. *Judenrat* were to be comprised of "influential people and rabbis."

Frank ordered that in areas with less than 10 000 Jews, the *Judenrat* would consist of 12 members, while in larger cities or towns the council would maintain of 24 members. The councils were to be elected by the local population and the council itself would elect its chairman and vice-chairman. The Germans then had to approve the selections. In certain cases, Jewish activists refused to participate in the *Judenraete*, as they suspected—correctly—how the Germans intended to exploit the councils, and that they would force them to act against their fellow Jews. However, in general, most Jewish leaders did join the *Judenraete*.

After the *Judenraete* were established, the Germans instructed them to carry out various administrative and economic measures that were destructive to the Jews. In most instances, the *Judenraete* tried to delay or lighten the



measures. Other *Judenraete* members believed that if they would comply with the Germans' demands, then the Germans would see how productive the Jews could be, and ease the blows. In a few cases, *Judenraete* members took advantage of their privileged positions for their personal gain - leading to much animosity and criticism on the part of the Jewish communities.

The *Judenraete* were put in charge of; transferring Jews from their homes to Ghettos, maintaining the peace and preventing smuggling. In addition, they were responsible to hand out the meager food rations allowed by the Germans. In some cases, the *Judenraete* tried to alleviate the starvation in their ghettos by procuring food illegally. The councils also set up mutual help organizations, hospitals, medical clinics, and orphanages.

From 1940 the *Judenraete* were ordered to provide workers to do forced labor in labor camps. In most cases the councils complied with the Germans' demand, again causing tension in the community.

When the Nazis embarked upon the "final solution"—the annihilation of European Jewry—they demanded from many of the *Judenraete* that they hand over names of Jews to be deported to extermination camps. Each council had to decide whether and how much to comply with the Germans. Most looked for ways to prevent or at least decelerate the deportation process; some did so by adopting a policy of "rescue by labor." They tried to show the Germans that the Jews were vital to the war economy as producers of various important products and armaments, and that the Germans could not afford to exterminate them en mass. Some council leaders decided to sacrifice certain elements of the community for others—cutting off the hand to save the rest of the body. Both during and after the war, this practice provoked great criticism and controversy. In several cases *Judenraete* members planned and took part in armed resistance to the Nazis.