

Minsk

Capital of Belorussia. On the eve of the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, 80,000 Jews lived in Minsk, representing one-third of the city's total population.

Minsk was one of the first cities in the Soviet Union to be occupied by the Germans, so few of its Jews managed to escape to the Soviet interior. The Germans quickly launched the organized persecution of the city's Jews. On July 8 an *Einsatzgruppe* unit began taking Jews out of Minsk to the nearby woods and shooting them. A ghetto was established on July 20; Jews from Minsk and nearby towns were herded in, as were non-Jews married to Jews and their children. All in total 100,000 Jews lived in the ghetto. A *Judenrat* was also formed in July under Eliyahu (Ilya) Mushkin. Soon, an underground group was established as well, under Hersh Smolar.

In November 1941 the Germans initiated an *aktion* in which 12,000 Jews were murdered. Soon after, Jews from the Reich were deported to Minsk; over the course of the next year, 35,442 had come. They were put into a separate ghetto, divided into sections according to their home cities in the Reich. The Germans launched another *aktion* later that month in which 7,000 Jews were murdered. The underground responded to the extermination by expanding its activities.

In March 1942 the Germans ordered the *Judenrat* to surrender 5,000 Jews, but the council refused. In retaliation, the Nazis attacked Jews coming home from work and killed more than 5,000. They also carried out murder operations at night throughout the spring of 1942.

At the end of July 1942 the Germans exterminated more than 30,000 Jews, including the German Jews from the second ghetto. When the *aktion* was over, only 9,000 Jews were left, and the *Judenrat* was dissolved.

The nearly 450 member ghetto underground sought to flee to the forests and become partisans. This flight gained momentum after the March 1942 *aktion*. Eventually seven partisan units were founded by Minsk Jews.

In March 1943 more German Jews were murdered, and in August, Jews from Minsk were deported to Sobibor. In September 2,000 Jews were sent to a

forced labor camp. The Germans carried out the final *aktion* in Minsk in October, murdering the last 4,000 Jews. Minsk was liberated on July 3, 1944. Only a handful of Jews who had hidden during the final *aktion* were left.