

Belgium

Country in Western Europe that was occupied by German forces on May 10, 1940, and surrendered on May 28 on the orders of King Leopold III. The king stayed in Belgium, but the prime minister and many cabinet members fled the country for London where they set up a government-in-exile. The German occupiers formed a military administration, which was replaced by a civil administration in July 1944. While the military had control over Belgium, the SS and its Reich Security Main Office (*Reichssicherheitshauptamt*, RSHA) tried very hard to extend their power in the country. However, the military administration made all attempts to restrain them.

Shortly after the occupation, 66,000 Jews lived in Belgium; only 10 percent of those were Belgian citizens. The rest were mostly immigrants who had fled to Belgium from Eastern Europe and Germany. The Jewish population was found mostly in Brussels and Antwerp, with large groups also residing in Liege and Charleroi. Of those 66,000 Jews, 34,801 were imprisoned or deported during the Holocaust, and of those, 28,902 perished.

The anti-Jewish policies in Belgium were similar to those in other countries occupied by the Nazis. However, due to the competition for power in Belgium between the German military administration and the SS representatives, anti-Jewish measures were enacted more slowly. In November 1940 Hermann Goering ordered that the Belgian economy be "Aryanized"—that Jewish businesses and property be confiscated and given to Germans. Many German businesses were indeed interested in buying Jewish-owned enterprises, but the Aryanization process only started a year later in late 1941. In fact, "Aryanization" was never fully completed in Belgium: many large Jewish businesses and real estate properties stayed under the control of their Jewish owners. However, the Germans did pillage other types of Jewish property. Those Jews who were deported had their possessions confiscated by Operational Staff Rosenberg (*Einstzstab Rosenberg*). Operational Staff Rosenberg also pillaged Jewish institutions, libraries, and art collections.

Over the first two years of the occupation, 18 anti-Jewish decrees were issued and carried out by the military administration. These regulations

included removing Jews from government positions and the professions, subjecting them to night curfews, forcing them to wear the yellow Jewish badge (see also badge, Jewish), and concentrating them in the four major cities. In November 1941 the Germans instituted a kind of *Judenrat* called the Association of Jews in Belgium (*Association des Juifs en Belgique*, AJB), to which every Jew was forced to belong. Soon, all Jewish children were kicked out of the public school system, and the AJB was made to set up its own schools. In January 1942 Jews were forbidden to leave Belgium. In March the Germans instituted a general labor draft, and the Jews of Belgium were subjected to forced labor. Most Belgian Jews engaged in forced labor were sent to build fortifications along the coast of northern France under the auspices of Organization Todt. A total of 2,252 Belgian Jews were forced to work there.

The "final solution" was launched in Belgium in the spring of 1942. At that time, the SS's RSHA took control of the country's Jewish affairs. Deportations from Belgium were ordered in the summer of that year. Adolf Eichmann and his Jewish affairs department in the RSHA made the plans for the transports, which began on August 4 and lasted for over a year. The last deportations took place in September 1943 during "Operation Iltis," when Jews with Belgian citizenship were deported. Until then, only immigrants and refugees had been sent away. The deportees were rounded up by the German military police, and most were sent to their deaths in Auschwitz. Smaller groups were sent to Buchenwald, Ravensbrueck, and Bergen-Belsen.