

Belarus

(White Russia), region in Eastern Europe between Russia and Poland, located to the south of Latvia and Lithuania and to the north of the Ukraine. After World War I, Belorussia was divided in two: the western part was ceded to Poland, while the eastern part became a republic in the Soviet Union. When World War II broke out in September 1939 and the Germans invaded Poland, the Soviets occupied most of Western Belorussia, according to the agreement made between the two countries in the pre-war Nazi-Soviet pact. However, the Nazis turned on their former allies in June 1941 when they invaded the Soviet Union. By July, they had occupied both Eastern and Western Belorussia.

On the eve of the 1941 German invasion of the Soviet Union, there were 670,000 Jews living in Western Belorussia, including refugees who had fled western Poland after the German invasion of 1939. By the end of June the Germans were in control of the region. The local population initiated a series of pogroms. The Germans themselves launched a wave of *aktionen*, in which *Einstzgruppen* units murdered 40 percent of the region's Jews. They were shot to death in pits near their cities and towns, and were immediately buried in these mass graves. This first group of *aktionen* lasted from July--December 1941; a second wave began in the spring of 1942 and continued until the end of that year. By that time, only 30,000 Jews were left in Western Belorussia outside of the Bialystok district, which the Germans had annexed to the Reich immediately upon invasion of the Soviet Union. The last Western Belorussian GHETTOS to be liquidated were Glubokoye and Lida in late summer 1943.

In Eastern Belorussia, there was a population of 405,000 Jews including refugees at the time of the 1941 German invasion of the Soviet Union. The Germans quickly conquered the main cities of Belorussia: MINSK fell to them on June 28, Vitebsk on July 11, and Smolensk by July 16. About 120,000 Jews were able to flee eastward into the Soviet interior; the rest were not so lucky. The Germans began exterminating the Jews en mass, without any resistance on the part of the local population. By the end of 1941, the Germans had murdered the Jews of 35 ghettos, including Gomel, Vitebsk,

Mogilev, and Bobruisk. Only the Minsk Ghetto, (which originally held 100,000 Jewish inhabitants), was allowed to exist until October 1943.

The mass murder of the Jews of Eastern Belorussia took place in large pits located close to the ghettos, and was carried out by *Einsatzgruppen* units, two police battalions, and units of Lithuanian, Belorussian, and Ukrainian policemen. In certain cases, the Germans utilized gas vans to kill the Jews.

From November 1941 to October 1942, the Germans deported many Jews from the Reich and from Poland to Belorussia. More than 35,000 Jews from the Reich and the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia were sent to the Minsk Ghetto, and 2,000 from Warsaw and other places in Poland were brought to a transit camp in Bobruisk. Any Jews left in Bobruisk were killed in September 1943. Another transit camp was set up in Mogilev, where 196 Jews were killed.

In both Eastern and Western Belorussia, Jews offered resistance to the Nazis. In Western Belorussia, there were both organized undergrounds and resistance without the help of an organization. Thousands of Jews hid from the Nazis, while at least 25,000 escaped to the forests. In Eastern Belorussia, Jews resisted in their ghettos; in Minsk, an organized underground functioned until the ghetto was liquidated. About 10,000 Jews from Minsk fled to the forests. Many joined partisan units, and two Jewish battalions operated there: that of the Bielski brothers and that of Shalom Zorin. The local population was quite hostile to the Jews. Only a very small number of people tried to rescue Jews. (see also resistance, Jewish and family camps in the forests.)