

Poland and the Holocaust

Prior to World War II there were 3,500,000 Jews in the Polish Second Republic, about 10% of the population, living predominantly in the cities. Between the September 1939 invasion of Poland and the end of World War II, over 90% of Polish Jewry perished.



Persecution of the Jews by the Nazi German occupation government, particularly in the urban areas, began immediately after the invasion. In the first year and a half, the Germans confined themselves to stripping the Jews of their valuables and property for profit, herding them into ghettos and putting them into forced labour

in war-related industries. During this period the Germans forced Jewish communities to appoint Jewish Councils (Judenräte) to administer the ghettos and to be “responsible in the strictest sense” for carrying out German orders. After the German attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941, German police units, especially the *Einsatzgruppen*, operated behind the front lines to shoot ‘dangerous elements’ (Jews and Communists). About 2 million Jews were shot and buried in mass graves — in what is today known as the Holocaust by Bullets — many in the areas of eastern Poland, which had been annexed by the Soviets in 1939. The survivors were incarcerated in newly created ghettos.

At the Wannsee conference (see separate section) near Berlin on 20 January 1942, Dr Josef Bühler urged Reinhard Heydrich to begin the proposed “final solution to the Jewish question”. Accordingly, in 1942, the Germans began the systematic killing of the Jews, beginning with the Jewish population of the General Government. Six extermination camps (Auschwitz, Belzec, Chelmno, Majdanek, Sobibor and Treblinka) were established in Poland in which the most extreme measures of the Holocaust, the mass murder of millions of Jews from Poland and other countries, was carried out between 1942 and 1944. The camps were designed and operated by Nazi Germans and there were no Polish guards at any of the camps, despite the sometimes-used misnomer Polish death camps. Of Poland’s prewar Jewish population of 3,500,000, only about 50,000-120,000 would survive the war.

On 17 September 1939, while the Poles were still attempting to stave off the German offensive, the Soviets invaded Poland and occupied the eastern part of the country. This was in accordance with the 'Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact', concluded between the Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov and his German counterpart von Ribbentrop prior to the invasion. Within three weeks the Germans had defeated Poland and divided it into three regions: the western and northern provinces of the former Polish state (including the country's second-largest city, Lodz) were annexed to the Reich; eastern districts were annexed to the Soviet Union and Lithuania; an enclave in central Poland was converted into the Generalgouvernement – an area whose political future was undefined during the initial phase of the occupation. Approximately 1.8 million Jews were trapped in the German-occupied zone of Poland, and more than a million Polish Jews in the eastern areas of Poland came under Soviet rule.

Following the onset of the war, the Germans freed themselves of many of the restraints they had maintained in peacetime. Circumstances no longer required them to bow to public opinion or political considerations. Unhesitatingly, they terrorised the Polish people, arrested and murdered its leaders and intellectual elite, defining Poles as "hewers of wood and drawers of water", and as servants of the "master race".

Since anti-Jewish policy and the solutions to the Jewish question were presented as part of the attempt to eliminate the damage caused by the Jews to the German nation and government, the police and SS were authorised to be the executive force in dealing with the Jews. On 21 September 1939, Reinhard Heydrich, chief of the Security Police, sent a directive the 'Schnellbrief' (express letter), explaining the procedures and approach that would be invoked against the Jews in the Polish occupation zones: Jews living in towns and villages were to be transferred to ghettos, and Jewish councils (Judenräte) would be established to carry out the German authorities' orders.

Heydrich's instructions distinguished between a transitional phase in solving the "Jewish problem" and the "final aim". It should not be presumed, however, that the term "Final Solution" had been defined by then or that the overall murder scheme had been planned. What existed at that time, apparently, were vague plans and a general and indefinite wish to solve the Jewish problem in some rapid and radical way. During this phase, the idea to deport the Jews from the Reich was still dominant. As they marched into the towns of Poland, Germans preyed on the Jews they encountered, subjecting them to humiliation and beatings, shearing the beards of the Orthodox and organising public hangings to terrorise the population. The perpetrators were members of special SS units who accompanied the regular military units. They torched synagogues and Jewish homes and abducted Jews on the street for forced labour to repair the damage from the battles. After receiving enormous monetary fines for having "caused" the World War and its attendant

devastation, Jewish leaders were inundated by decrees, such as the registration of a Jewish labour force and the imposition of compulsory labour. The Jews were steadily dispossessed of their possessions and deprived of their sources of livelihood. Throughout the occupied areas the Germans restored the medieval practice of requiring Jews to wear a badge of shame, armbands with the Star of David or yellow Stars of David on their lapels.



In less than two years, from the onset of their offensive against Poland in September 1939 to the beginning of the campaign against the Soviet Union in June 1941, the Germans managed to conquer most of Europe. Norway, Denmark, Belgium, France, the Netherlands, Yugoslavia and Greece fell after only brief military operations.

After completing their immensely successful military campaign in the west, the Germans tightened their grip on European Jewry. South-Eastern Europe; Italy, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria, willingly accepted the German dictate and were incorporated into the Nazi sphere of influence. In the vastness of continental Europe, which the Germans considered the domain of their “new order”, the Jews had come under the Nazis’ thumb.

Though Nazi ideology prescribed the same fate for all of European Jewry, different methods of implementation of anti-Jewish policy were employed in the conquered countries. It was clear to the Nazis that in Western Europe antisemitism lacked the intensity and popularity of the Eastern European version and that much of the local population viewed the Jewish populace as an integral part of society. Thus, in terms of the implementation of their anti-Jewish policy, they had to be more considerate of the local populations and of the governments that had been left with some measure of self-rule.

In Western Europe, the Nazis did not ghettoise the Jews, whereas in Eastern Europe the Germans placed the Jews in severely congested ghettos. They were imprisoned behind fences and walls, with the active assistance of the local population, cutting them off from the outside world and their sources of livelihood. The Jews there were doomed to humiliation, poverty, decline and death. In Western Europe the Nazis applied their anti-Jewish policy gradually. They enforced racial legislation and introduced policies of Aryanisation and discrimination. Despite these differences, the Germans’ overall goal with regard to the Jews was identical: to remove them from the realms of German conquest by expulsion or death resulting from their worsening conditions.

Expropriation of Jewish property was an essential element of Nazi anti-Jewish policy. The Nazis systematically plundered land and property throughout Europe that had

been obtained through hard work and creativity for hundreds of years and which were an important part of Jewish economic and cultural activity. At the outbreak of the war, according to Nazi directives, apartments and real estate, factories and industries, small businesses and cultural and art treasures were to be seized.

GHETTOS

After the invasion of Poland, the Nazis established ghettos in the incorporated territories and General Government in which Jews were confined. These were initially seen as temporary, until the Jews were deported out of Europe. Such deportation never took place, with the ghettos' inhabitants instead being sent to extermination camps. The Germans ordered each ghetto be run by



a **Judenrat** consisting of Jewish community leaders, with the first order for the establishment of such councils contained in a letter dated 29 September 1939 from Heydrich to the heads of the *Einsatzgruppen*. The ghettos were formed and closed off from the outside world at different times and for different reasons. The councils were responsible for the day-to-day running of the ghetto, including the distribution of food, water, heat, medicine and shelter. The Germans also mandated them to undertake confiscations, organise forced labour, and finally, facilitate deportations to extermination camps. The councils' basic strategy was one of trying to minimise losses, largely by cooperating with Nazi authorities (or their surrogates), accepting the increasingly terrible treatment, bribery and petitioning for better conditions and clemency. Overall, to try and mitigate still worse cruelty and death, "the councils offered words, money, labour and finally lives".

The ultimate test of each *Judenrat* was the demand to compile lists of names of deportees to be murdered. Though the predominant pattern was compliance with even this final task, some council leaders insisted that not a single individual should be handed over if they had not committed a capital crime. Leaders such as Joseph Parnas in Lviv, who refused to compile a list, were shot. On 14 October 1942, the entire council of Byarozza committed suicide rather than cooperate with the deportations.

In Warsaw **Adam Czerniaków** (see Biographies) killed himself on 23 July 1942 when he could take no more as the final liquidation of the ghetto got under way. Others, like Chaim Rumkowski, who became the "dedicated autocrat" of Lodz, argued that their responsibility was to save the Jews who *could* be saved, and that therefore others had to be sacrificed.

The importance of the councils in facilitating the persecution and murder of ghetto inhabitants was not lost on the Germans: one official was emphatic

that “the authority of the Jewish council be upheld and strengthened under all circumstances”, another that “Jews who disobey instructions of the Jewish council are to be treated as saboteurs”. When such cooperation crumbled, as happened in the Warsaw ghetto after the Jewish Combat Organisation displaced the council’s authority, the Germans temporarily lost control.

MASS MURDER AND THE FINAL SOLUTION

The turning point in the Nazis’ plan to “solve the Jewish problem” began with Operation Barbarossa, the massive military invasion of the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941, intended to wind up the war by the winter. The invasion had been planned for a long time, and in anticipation, the Germans prepared units of Ukrainian, Lithuanian, Latvian and Belarusian nationalist and oppositionist collaborators.



Hitler considered the invasion of the **Soviet Union** as part of his plan to provide the German nation with “living space” (Lebensraum) and an opportunity to destroy Communism, which he loathed. For this reason he instructed his military commanders to subject Kommissars (political officers who accompanied the Red Army) and intellectuals to cruel and harsh treatment. Under his inspiration, the “Kommissars Order” set out the rules for treatment of these officials and for Jews in the Soviet territories.

In the first weeks of the invasion Jewish women and children were shot by happenstance, but by the middle of August the scope of the murders had been widened to include all Jews. This policy crystallised as a result of Hitler’s visit to the front and his conclusion that the territorial solution to the Jewish problem was by then impractical, a conclusion that paved the way for the systematic mass murder of the Jews. Jewish women and children were defined as “worthless consumers” who could not contribute to the workforce.

Four special operations divisions (Einsatzgruppen) – A, B, C, and D – operated behind the corps that took part in the campaign against the USSR. The units were made up of SS, police and auxiliaries mobilised from the local population.

Hundreds of thousands of Jews managed to flee into the depths of the Soviet Union, but approximately 2 million Jews remained under Nazi occupation and were the victims of mass murder carried out by the Einsatzgruppen units. In less than half a year, by the end of 1941, about half a million Jews had been murdered within the areas of the Soviet Union conquered by the Nazi. The murders generally took place in forests, valleys and abandoned buildings close to the homes of the victims. The Jews were forced to undress and hand over their valuables a short distance from the mass graves. They were taken in groups to the pits and shot. Many were buried alive.



In September 1941, members of Einsatzgruppe C murdered 33,771 Jews from Kiev over two days in **Babi Yar**. Babi Yar also became a site for the mass murder of Sinti and Roma and Soviet prisoners of war.

From November 1941, Jews and other victims of the Nazi regime (Soviet POWs, partisans, hostages and others) were murdered in the Blagovshchina forest,

close to the village of Maly Trostinets, southeast of Minsk. The first to die were some 100,000 Jews from the Minsk ghetto, and starting in May 1942, Jews were brought from Germany, Bohemia and Moravia, Poland and the Low Countries and murdered there. Some were murdered in gas vans, and the rest were shot. All the victims were buried in pits that had been dug in advance. According to different estimates, between 206,500 and half a million people were murdered in the Trostinets area.

Towards the end of 1941 the Germans realised that they would not defeat the Soviet Union in a lightning war as they had originally planned. The German army would require a workforce that would help in paving roads, clearing minefields, producing ordinance and equipment. The decision was thus made to temporarily leave Jewish prisoners alive in camps and ghettos in order to employ them for the German war effort. The extermination was renewed in its full intensity in the spring of 1942. By the winter of 1943 most of the Jews of Belorussia and almost half of the 2.5 million Jews of Ukraine had already been murdered.

Some 220,000 Jews were living in **Lithuania** when the Germans invaded in June 1941. Even before the Germans arrived at the major Jewish settlements, murderous riots perpetrated by the Lithuanians broke out against the Jews. At the encouragement of the Germans, the riots continued and thousands of Jews were murdered.

The German entrance to Lithuania was accompanied by acts of murder, rape, looting and abuse. The victims were led from Vilna to the Ponar forest pits nearby, shot by Germans and Lithuanians and thrown in. Few survived the massacres, and of those, hardly any managed to elude the local population. From July 1941 to 1944, more than 70,000 people, nearly all of them Jews, were murdered at Ponar.



On 15 August 1941, the Kovno ghetto was sealed, and as per German orders, 20,000 Jews were imprisoned in the poorer section of the Slobodka (Williampola) suburb. The fatal turning point in the lives of the ghetto inmates came on 28 October 1941, when the Germans gathered all of the Jews in the ghetto and a brutal selection took place. More than 9,000 residents of the ghetto were led to the Ninth Fort (one of the forts surrounding the city) and murdered. By the end of 1941 only 40,000 Jews remained in all of Lithuania and they were concentrated in four ghettos – **Vilna, Kovno, Siauliai** and **Swieciany** – and in a few labour camps.

In the summer and autumn of 1943, the Vilna and Swieciany ghettos were liquidated and the ghettos in Kovno and Siauliai were converted to concentration camps. A few months later approximately 1,200 babies, children and elderly people were murdered in the Kovno ghetto, and many youngsters were sent from the ghetto to labour camps in Estonia. In July 1944, with Kovno on the brink of liberation by the Soviet army, the ghettos in Kovno and Swieciany were liquidated and many of their inhabitants were sent westwards to camps in areas still under German control, including **Stutthof, Dachau**, and **Auschwitz-Birkenau**. Approximately 10,000 Lithuanian Jews were still alive when Germany surrendered in May 1945, as well as some 2,000 Jews who had fled to the Soviet Union and survived the war there.

Germany occupied **Latvia** at the beginning of the invasion of Russia. At that time approximately 74,000 Jews were living in the country. Units from Einsatzgruppe A carried out the first mass murder of Latvian Jews in July 1941. By the end of October 34,000 Latvian Jews had been murdered.

32,000 Jews were sealed into two ghettos in Riga. In November 1941 Friedrich Jeckeln, a senior SS officer, was ordered by Himmler to liquidate the ghettos and then to liquidate all of Latvian Jewry. Between 30 November and 7 December 1941, 25,000 Jews were murdered in the Rumbula forest. At the same time the Jews of the ghettos of Dvinsk and Liepaja were also murdered.

Before World War II, 4,550 Jews lived in **Estonia**, the smallest of the Baltic States, about half in the capital city of Tallinn. The Soviet Union occupied Estonia in 1940 as a result of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. The Germans conquered Estonia in July 1941 and many Jews fled to the Soviet Union. Those who did not manage to escape were placed under a harsh regime of restrictions: they were forced to don the yellow star and were stripped of their possessions. With the arrival of the Einsatzgruppen units the destruction of Estonian Jewry began. Local right-wing militias assisted in the murder of the Jews and by October 1941 most of the Jewish males above the age of 16 had already been murdered. It was reported at the **Wannsee Conference** (January 1942) that Estonia had been successfully rendered “judenfrei”, free of Jews.

There is no document that indicates specifically by whom, at what time, and in what way it was decided to embark on the total extermination of the Jews. Many scholars believe that such an order was never issued in writing; instead, it was given orally, by Hitler, or with his knowledge, in the summer of 1941. On July 31, 1941, shortly after the invasion of the Soviet Union, the Nazi Reichsmarschall Herman Göring ordered Reinhard Heydrich, head of the RSHA (Reich Main Security Office), *“to make all the necessary preparations... for the Final Solution of the Jewish problem in the German sphere of influence in Europe”*.

Immediately following the invasion, the mass murder of men, women and children began, but in November 1941, the German policy toward Jews took a fateful turn. Mass murder by gunfire failed to meet the Nazis' expectations and was taking a cumulative toll on the German soldiers' performance. By then, too, the Nazi leadership realised that the Blitzkrieg had not gone well, that the war against the Soviet Union would not end quickly, and that killing by gunfire was not efficient enough and failed to achieve its goal. As a result, a decision was made in November or December to shift to organised, systematic murder on an industrial scale.

Already in the summer of 1941, Rudolf Höss, commander of the **Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp** (near the Polish town Oswiecim), had received orders to explore new methods of mass murder using poison gas. The Germans had already employed gas in the Euthanasia Programme and had murdered tens of thousands of the physically and mentally handicapped until the programme was halted due to pressure from the German public and clergy. However, the methods



and knowledge gained during this programme served as the basis for the systematic mass murder of the Jews – the “Final Solution”.

The first experiment with mass murder by gas was performed in Auschwitz in September 1941. The victims of the experiment were Soviet prisoners of war. The Germans pumped Zyklon B, a cyanic gas, into a sealed room and within a few minutes the victims had all been killed.

On 20 January 1942, a crucial meeting was held in Wannsee (a suburb of Berlin), chaired by Reinhard Heydrich with the participation of 15 officials and representatives of the Reich authorities. At this meeting, the Reich Security Main Office coordinated the extermination plans vis-à-vis the relevant ministries and authorities. Heydrich spoke about the inclusion of 11,000,000 Jews in the Nazi programme for the “*Final Solution to the Jewish Question*”. *The minutes of the Wannsee Conference record that: “Due to the war, the emigration plan has been replaced with deportation of the Jews to the east, in accordance with the Führer’s will.”* **As a result of the meeting a network of extermination camps was established in which millions of Jews were murdered in 1942-1943.**

With the advent of the European-wide *Final Solution* the Jews were generally ordered to gather within close proximity of railroad stations. They were then deported to the extermination camps on extended trips under horrendous conditions that claimed many victims. The Jews of Europe were systematically murdered in the extermination camps as part of the Final Solution. In some of the camps permanent gas chambers were erected. In Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka and Chelmno, practically all of the deportees – men, women and children – were sent straight to their deaths.

In many cases, the deportation orders were given to the Judenrat suddenly, often around the Jewish holidays when awareness was reduced. Local police were charged with carrying out the *Aktion* (round-up of Jews) and the Jewish police were also tasked with participating in the round-up.

The Jews were ordered to gather in a specific location, usually close to a train station, and to bring with them only a few possessions. During the *Aktion* anyone that did not follow the order to gather or could not keep pace with the others was shot. At the train station the Jews were loaded into crowded cattle cars without proper ventilation. The cars were sealed from the outside and the Jews were kept in the cars for days without water or food until they reached their destination. Many perished as a result of the conditions on the train.

The powerful mechanism of murder employed throughout Europe relied upon various deceptions and lies. The Jews in Poland were told that “non-essential and unproductive elements” would be sent for labour in the east while Jews in the west were informed of their transfer to settlements in the east. The murder machine



would suddenly descend upon cities and towns and the *Aktion* would last for days or weeks. The Germans would begin the deportations with the weaker strata (the poor, refugees). The other sectors of society held on to the illusion that they would be left alone. After the initial deportation the ensuing stages would follow – until the complete liquidation.

The Jews' response to the brutal scheme was a consequence of several factors. During the years preceding the extermination operation, the Nazis had done everything possible to drain the Jews of their physical strength, numb their will, deprive them of their human dignity, destroy their ability to organise and cut them off from the outside world. Indeed, systematic starvation and looming death had diminished the endurance of the ghettoised masses and their ability to gather their strength. By now the Jews concerned themselves with immediate matters only – rescue of family members, obtaining some bread and sustaining the body, which yearned for warmth and nutrition.

The *Aktionen* dealt the Jews a blow that thwarted any possibility of organising large-scale self-defense of any kind. The rumours about the death camps were usually greeted with disbelief, as ordinary logic and the human mind refused to grasp the very possibility of what was rumoured. Thus, Nazi Germany managed to mislead the masses until, literally, the last moment.



Chelmno was the first extermination camp the Germans established on Polish soil. Murder operations began there on 8 December 1941, and continued intermittently until January 1945. The Jews of the Lodz ghetto and the vicinity were the primary victims deported to Chelmno, where they were murdered by means of

gas vans. When the deportees reached the camp, they were ordered to undress, stripped of their belongings, and tricked into boarding a van whose exhaust pipe was actually connected to its interior. After the doors were closed, the van began to drive toward a designated burial place in a nearby forest. No one survived. By using three gas vans, nearly 300,000 Jews and 5,000 Sinti and Roma were murdered in Chelmno. Only three Jews are known to have survived this death camp.

Starting in March 1942, after the guidelines for action were worked out at the Wannsee Conference, the Germans established three extermination camps at the eastern boundary of the Generalgouvernement, not far from main railroad lines: **Belzec** (established in March 1942, this camp functioned until December of that year; in the spring of 1943, the cremation of bodies began in order to cover up the traces of the murders committed); **Sobibor** (May-July 1942, and October 1942-October 1943); and **Treblinka** (July 1942-August 1943).

The Nazis' purpose in building these camps was to carry out the systematic murder of European Jewry as part of the Final Solution. Permanent gas chambers were constructed in these camps and selections were performed. As the deportation trains arrived, the victims – men, women and children – were sent directly to the gas chambers. Approximately 1,700,000 Jews, mostly from Poland, were murdered in these three extermination camps.

A standard method of extermination was used in these three camps: carbon monoxide from large tank engines was released into sealed chambers. The victims were stripped of their clothing and crowded into the gas chambers where they died of suffocation within a short time. The corpses were removed by Jewish slave labourers and thrown into large pits and they were later burned in an attempt to destroy any evidence. The entire process of murder took only a few hours and the camps would process and murder numerous transports in the same day.

Majdanek was established in late 1941, for Soviet prisoners of war and as a concentration camp for Poles. The gas chambers and crematoria were built in 1942. In the spring of that year, thousands of Jews, Slovaks, Czechs, Germans and Poles were murdered in Majdanek. The camp operated until the Soviet army liberated the Lublin area in July 1944. Approximately 78,000 people were murdered in Majdanek.

Only a small percentage of those who arrived in transports in 1944 to the remaining death camps – **Auschwitz**, **Majdanek** and **Chelmno** – were selected for labour. They were chosen for various tasks in the extermination process such as sorting through and packing the clothing and possessions of the victims and burying and disposing of the bodies by burning them. This latter group of Jews was part of the Sonderkommando units, special units that worked under cruel and terror-ridden conditions. These workers were often sent to be murdered in the gas chambers after a few months and replaced with “new” prisoners. The others, women, men, children, the elderly and those whose strength had failed during their brief internment in the camp, were taken straight to the gas chambers. Transports and extermination continued until late 1944. Although Himmler ordered a dismantling of gas chambers, prisoners continued to die of exhaustion, starvation and disease.



In December 1941 the murder of the Jews from the **Lodz ghetto** began in Chelmno with gas vans. Murder of Polish Jews in **Auschwitz** began in March 1942 and between March and July 1942, with the arrival of the deportation trains, men, women and children were sent straight to their deaths in the gas chambers of **Belzec**, **Sobibor** and **Treblinka**.



On 22 July 1942, on the eve of the Ninth of Av in the Jewish calendar, the Germans began the mass deportations from the **Warsaw ghetto**. By the time they ended on 21 September, Yom Kippur, some 260,000 inhabitants of the ghetto had been deported to the Treblinka extermination camp.

Approximately 1,700,000 Jews, primarily from Poland, were murdered in Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka by the end of 1943 and between September 1942 and the summer of 1944 tens of thousands of Jews, most from Poland, were murdered in Majdanek, outside of Lublin.

In the summer of 1944 the remaining 80,000 Jews from the **Lodz ghetto** were deported to be murdered. Most were sent to **Auschwitz-Birkenau**, while some were sent to the Chelmno murder site, which was reopened for this purpose. Approximately 300,000 Jews were murdered in Chelmno, mostly from Poland. The murders in Auschwitz and Chelmno continued until the Red Army liberated the camps in January 1945.

At the end of the war, approximately 380,000 Polish Jews were still alive in Poland, the Soviet Union, or in the concentration camps in Germany, Austria and the Czech territories.



Death March, Dachau to Tolz, (1945) a pencil drawing by Hellmut Bachrach-Baree (1898-1969).

© 2011 Yad Vashem The Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority.

DEATH MARCHES

As the Third Reich crumbled and the eastern front collapsed, the Germans began a comprehensive retreat to the west, towards Germany. In the summer of 1944, while the Soviets were launching their massive push in the east, the Germans began clearing out the concentration camps and forcing the prisoners on death marches to the west. Prisoners were forced to march long distances in bitter cold, with little or no food, water, or rest. Those who

could not keep up were shot. The marches served a twofold purpose: to ensure that no witnesses would be left to testify to the murders, as well as to exploit the Jewish labour force until the last possible moment at the destination of the marches in German and Austrian camps. The guards who were ordered to lead the prisoners understood that these duties were an obstacle to their own escape from the Red Army; thus, they were all the more eager to kill the prisoners and get away. This mass murder continued until Germany's surrender on 8 May 1945.

The first camps to be evacuated were in the Baltic States and in eastern and central Poland. At that time the camps were usually evacuated by train, with Kaiserwald being evacuated by boat, but some prisoners also departed the camps on foot. Shortly afterwards a massive wave of death marches began.

On 28 July 1944, the camp established on the ruins of the Warsaw ghetto was evacuated and 3,600 prisoners, mostly from Greece and Hungary, were forced on a death march. Their destination was Kutno, approximately 130 kilometers from Warsaw. The Germans shot anyone who lagged behind along the route. Food was not provided for the prisoners and they were prevented from drinking water. The surviving prisoners were transported on freight cars from Kutno to **Dachau**. Fewer than 2,000 inmates reached Dachau on 9 August 1944.

In September 1944, some 4,000 inmates were marched from Bor, Yugoslavia to Hungary, from where they were sent to Oranienburg, Germany. More than 3,000 of the marchers were murdered. In November 1944, 70,000 Jews were marched from Budapest to concentration camps in the Third Reich, primarily to **Dachau** and **Mauthausen**. Tens of thousands were murdered during the march.



In January 1945, as a result of renewed Soviet attacks, the evacuation of the rest of the camps in Poland began. The larger death marches of that month left from **Auschwitz** in the south and **Stutthof** in the north. The evacuation of Auschwitz

and its sub camps began on 18 January 1945. Approximately 66,000 prisoners, mostly Jews, were marched and taken in freight cars to various camps, most to **Gross-Rosen**, **Buchenwald**, **Dachau** and **Mauthausen**. At least 15,000 perished during the journey. A few days later the evacuation of the subcamps of Stutthof began and the main camp of Stutthof was evacuated on January 25. In total, some 26,000 of the 50,000 inmates of Stutthof perished in the marches or were shot on the beach.

The evacuation of Gross-Rosen and some its subcamps began in February 1945. Some 40,000 prisoners were evacuated. Thousands were murdered along the way and the remainder was sent to the concentration camps **Dora-Mittelbau**, **Flossenburg**, **Buchenwald**, **Mauthausen**, **Dachau**, **Bergen-Belsen** and **Sachsenhausen**. From March 1945 until the German surrender on 8 May, at least a quarter of a million prisoners were forced on death marches that lasted for weeks at a time. They perished throughout central Germany and western Austria from suffocation, heat, starvation, hunger and thirst in freight cars, or were murdered on the foot marches.

At the end of March and beginning of April, 21,000 – 23,000 of the 48,000 prisoners of Buchenwald were marched hundreds of kilometers to other concentration camps.

The death marches continued until the last day of the war. In total, from the summer of 1944 until the end of the war, between 200,000 – 250,000 Nazi concentration camp prisoners were killed. After the war hundreds of mass graves with the corpses of tens of thousands of prisoners who perished on these marches were found all along the routes of the marches.

Number of Jewish Victims Murdered in Death Camps Located in Nazi-Occupied Poland



MAJDANEK
75,000
(60,000 were Jews, followed by Soviet POWs, Poles and others)

SOBIBOR
250,000 Jews

CHELMNO
300,000
(Almost all Jews, along with a few thousand Gypsies)

BELZEC
500,000 Jews

TREBLINKA
875,000 Jews

AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU
1-1.1 Million Jews
(Plus 75,000 Poles, Gypsies, Russian POWs and others)

Note: These camps are mentioned because they were used as "death factories" which employed technology (i.e. poisonous gas) to murder its many victims. There were hundreds of other concentration/labor/assembly/transit camps built by the Nazis throughout Europe, where tens of thousands of Jews were murdered, either through conventional execution, or starvation and disease brought on by their horrific living conditions.

In Poland, for instance, approximately 65,000 mostly Jewish prisoners were murdered in Stutthof, the first concentration camp created by the Nazis outside Germany. In Maly Trostenets, just east of Minsk in Belarus, up to 65,000 prisoners, mostly Jews, were murdered. Another 135,000 prisoners, including large numbers of Soviet POWs, were murdered in the Trostenets area. This horrific pattern of mass murder was repeated by the Nazis untold times throughout Nazi-occupied Europe. A complete listing of all the Nazi camps and the number of victims in each would fill several pages.

from *The Holocaust* by Martin Gilbert
Copyright © 1985 Martin Gilbert