

OPERATION REINHARDT 1942-1943



**INSTYTUT
PAMIĘCI
NARODOWEJ**

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Photo: Jews from the Warsaw
Ghetto in 1943.
Photo: AIPN



THE ANTI-JEWISH POLICY OF THE THIRD REICH

Hatred of the Jews was one of the most important elements of the propaganda machine designed by Adolf Hitler and his collaborators. When the Nazi Party took power in Germany, postulates about the need to eliminate "eternal enemies," "subhumans" and "racially inferior" people from society became part of state policy. Harassment of the Jewish population, including the prohibition on marrying non-Jews, serving in the military, or holding administrative positions, turned into massive repressions. On the night of 9–10 November 1938, nearly 100 Jews were murdered across Germany, more than 170 synagogues (houses of worship) were burnt down, most Jewish cemeteries were destroyed, and thousands of Jewish homes and shops were devastated.

The extent of Nazi antisemitism became apparent in September 1939, when Germany attacked Poland. In many towns and villages, German soldiers committed gruesome crimes against Jewish citizens of the Republic of Poland. Apart from beatings, murders, rapes, robberies and other forms of harassment, numerous synagogues were set ablaze, sometimes with people trapped inside.



Ruins of a synagogue in Mława burnt by the Germans in September 1939.
Photo: AIPN



German soldiers harass Jews by cutting off their beards
Photo: AIPN



Orthodox Jews of Rzeszów forced to sweep the street
Photo: NAC

After the end of military operations and the incorporation of all of Silesia, Greater Poland, Pomerania and northern Masovia into Germany, the General Government was established in central Poland. It was divided into four large administrative units – districts with capitals in Kraków, Lublin, Radom and Warsaw (in 1941, the Galicia District with its capital in Lviv was added). The Jews there were promptly targeted by a series of decrees issued by the German authorities. These included the obligation to wear a white armband with the Star of David, confiscation of money and other property, or deprivation of the right to public health care and welfare services. Jewish schools, libraries, and the headquarters of social organisations were also closed and devastated. Jews were given food rations at starvation levels and all persons aged 14–60 were subjected to forced labour, either in their places of residence or in camps spread all over the General Government.



Jewish boy selling Star of David armbands on a street in Warsaw
Photo: NAC



Decree obligating all Jews in the Kraków district to wear armbands with the Star of David
Photo: public domain



German propaganda poster depicting Jews as carriers of infectious diseases
Photo: AIPN

IN THE GENERAL GOVERNMENT

OGŁOSZENIE

o stworzeniu żydowskich dzielnic mieszkaniowych w okręgu warszawskim

§ 1

Na podstawie policyjnego rozporządzenia o stworzeniu żydowskich dzielnic mieszkaniowych w okręgu Warszaw i Lublin z dnia 28 października 1942 r. (Dz. rozp. GG. str. 665) tworzy się w okręgu warszawskim żydowskie dzielnice mieszkaniowe w następujących miastach i gminach:

- a) w WARSZAWIE-MIEŚCIE (getto),
- b) w KALUSZYNIE (Star. Pow. Minsk),
- c) w SOBOLEWIE (Star. Pow. Garwolin),
- d) w KOSSOWIE (Star. Pow. Sokółów),
- e) w REMBERTOWIE (Star. Warszawa-Powiat),
- f) w SIEDLĄCACH (Star. Pow. Siedlce).

§ 2

- 1) Wszyscy Żydzi w okręgu warszawskim winni do dnia 30 listopada 1942 r. obrat sobie miejsce pobytu w jednej z wymienionych wyżej żydowskich dzielnic mieszkaniowych. Wszystkie pozostałe osoby winny do tego czasu opuścić żydowskie dzielnice mieszkaniowe, o ile nie otrzymają policyjnego zezwolenia na pobyt.
- 2) Ci Żydzi, którzy obratą sobie miejsce pobytu w getcie warszawskim, winni się w pierwszej połowie listopada 1942 r. zgłosić w radzie żydowskiej przy ul. Żelaznej, celem zarejestrowania i przydzielenia mieszkań oraz środków żywnościowych. Zmieniając zarządzenie Komisarza dla dzielnicy żydowskiej w Warszawie o granicach żydowskiej dzielnicy mieszkaniowej z dnia 1 lutego 1942 r., ustala się następujące granice żydowskiej dzielnicy mieszkaniowej w getcie warszawskim: Stawki, Pokorna, Maranowska, Bonifraterska, Franciszkanka, Gęsta, Smocza, Parysowski, Szczerbiwa.
- 3) Od dnia 1 grudnia 1942 r. nie wolno żadnemu Żydowi w okręgu warszawskim bez policyjnego zezwolenia przebywać poza obrębem żydowskiej dzielnicy mieszkaniowej lub opuszczać jej. Od dnia 1 grudnia 1942 r. innym osobom wolno przebywać w żydowskiej dzielnicy mieszkaniowej lub wchodzić do niej tylko za policyjnym zezwoleniem. Zezwolenia udziela właściwy ze względu na żydowską dzielnicę mieszkaniową starosta powiatowy, dla getta w Warszawie Komisarz żydowskiej dzielnicy mieszkaniowej w porozumieniu z Dowódcą 11 i Policji w okręgu warszawskim.
- 4) Od obowiązku obrania sobie żydowskiej dzielnicy mieszkaniowej zwolnieni są Żydzi, zatrudnieni w zakładach gospodarki wojennej i zbrojeniowej, a umieszczeni w zamkniętych obozach.

§ 3

- 1) Żydzi, wyrażający przeciwko przepisom § 2, podlegają według istniejących postanowień karze śmierci.
- 2) Tej samej karze podlega ten, kto takim Żydom świadomie udzieli schronienia, tym, kto w szczególności umieszcza Żyda poza obrębem żydowskiej dzielnicy mieszkaniowej, tym, kto go lub ukrywa.
- 3) Wobec tego, kto uzyska wiadomość o tym, że jakiś Żyd bezprawnie przebywa poza obrębem żydowskiej dzielnicy mieszkaniowej, a nie zgłosi tego policyjnie, zastosowane będą policyjne środki bezpieczeństwa (np. umieszczenie w obozie koncentracyjnym).
- 4) Osoby, nie będące Żydami, które wobec przepisów § 2 nie opuszczały na czas żydowskiej dzielnicy mieszkaniowej lub które wejdą do niej bez policyjnego zezwolenia, ulegną w postępowaniu karno-administracyjnym karze grzywny do 1000 złotych z czynną na karę aresztu do trzech miesięcy.

Warszawa, dnia 16 listopada 1942 r.

Gubernator Okręgu Warszawskiego
Dowódca 11 i Policji

Warsaw – an announcement of the so-called residual ghettos in the Warsaw District
Photo: AIPN

Entrance gate to the Warsaw Ghetto, the largest ghetto in occupied Europe, dividing the Żelazna Street at the corner with Grzybowska Street (left)
Photo: AIPN

GETTA



Forcing Jews to live in ghettos was another form of German repression. The German authorities chose the poorest areas of the cities, often with old, dilapidated buildings, poor sanitary conditions and limited access to drinking water. Jews from other districts, and sometimes also Jewish inhabitants of suburban towns and villages, were resettled there by force. Although the first ghetto in occupied Poland was established as early as October 1939 in Piotrków Trybunalski, most of them were created between 1940 and 1941. The living conditions in each district were unimaginably difficult – extremely cramped living conditions, lack of medical supplies, inability to maintain hygiene and widespread and growing hunger contributed to the outbreak of typhus and other infectious diseases. Each ghetto had a high mortality rate, especially among the elderly and children. Many people also lost their lives due to the exhausting forced labour and executions perpetrated by the Germans. As time passed, ghettos were gradually closed, and leaving them could be deadly for all Jews. The same punishment applied to all Polish people willing to support a fugitive from the ghetto with food or shelter.



Construction of a wall on the boundary of the Kraków ghetto
Photo: AIPN



German warning sign on the boundary of the ghetto in Łódź
Photo: AIPN



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After the outbreak of the war, there were disputes among the officials of the German party, police and economic authorities about the fate of the Jews. Although some advocated that they should be used for as long as possible to support the German war machine with slave labour, the views of fanatical antisemites prevailed, postulating the quick and complete annihilation of the Jewish population in all of German-occupied Europe and in the countries allied with the Third Reich. In July 1941, Reinhard Heydrich was given the task of formulating a plan for the "final solution to the Jewish question." He proposed to his superiors that the most "efficient" method of mass murder would be the use of gas chambers. It was agreed that the extermination of Jews would take place predominantly in the General Government, where three special extermination camps would be established, namely Bełżec, Sobibór and Treblinka. Later on, it was decided to use the existing German concentration camps – KL Lublin (Majdanek) and KL Auschwitz – for extermination purposes. As early as December 1941, the first extermination centre in occupied Poland was opened – Kulmhof in Chełmno nad Nerem – where Jews from the Greater Poland and the Łódź districts (among others) were murdered.

Warning sign on the boundary of the German Concentration Camp KL Lublin
Photo: AIPN

„THE FINAL SOLUTION TO THE JEWISH QUESTION”



Reinhard Heydrich (1904–1942). He was notorious for his extreme hatred of Jews. When he was assassinated, German high officials decided to honour him by naming the mass extermination of the Jewish population in the General Government after him
Photo: AIPN



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Adolf Eichmann (1906–1962). He was one of the most important executors of the extermination of the Jewish population, personally responsible for the “cleansing” of Germany, Austria and the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. He visited the extermination camps to inspect the operation of the gas chambers and ensure that they were as “efficient” as possible
Photo: AIPN



Odilo Globocnik (1904–1945). In November 1939, he took the post of SS and police commander in the Lublin District, where he was in charge of the Germanisation process and expulsions. He commanded Operation Reinhardt and the process of building extermination camps
Photo: NAC



Hans Frank (1900–1946). The head of the General Government, ironically referred to in Berlin as the “King of Poland.” He was determined to confine Jews in ghettos and to allocate the smallest possible food rations to them. In 1942, after it was decided to reduce bread rations, he wrote in his diary: “It must be stated in passing that we are condemning one and a half million Jews to death by starvation”
Photo: AIPN

Execution by firing squad at the wall of the Warsaw Ghetto
Photo: AIPN



MURDERERS BEHIND THE DESK

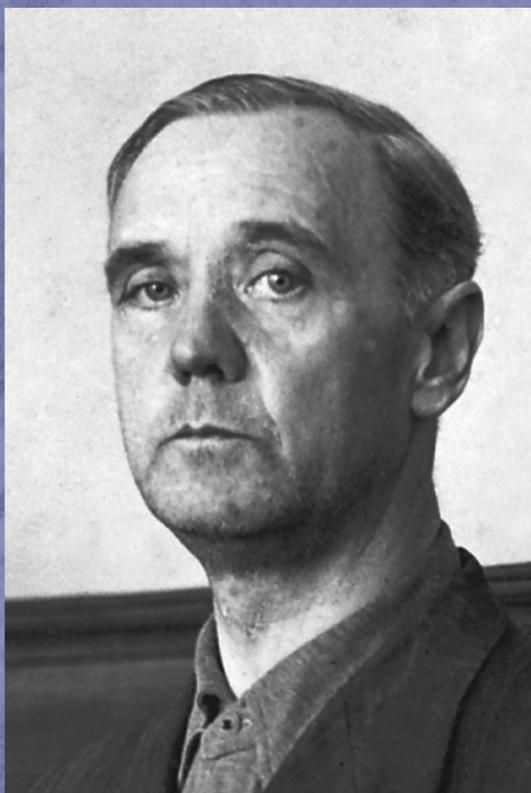


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EXECUTIONERS



Herman Höfle (1911–1962). Odilo Globocnik's closest associate, serving as chief of staff of Operation Reinhardt. He coordinated the actions of police commanders in various districts of the General Government. He supervised the deportation of Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto, and in 1943 he led Operation Harvest Festival
Photo: public domain



Wilhelm Blum (1890–1948). Member of the staff of Operation Reinhardt. In the summer of 1942, he was transferred from Lublin to Radom to assist the local police authorities in the liquidation of ghettos in the Radom District of the General Government
Photo: AIPN



Christian Wirth (1885–1944). First commandant of the Bełżec camp, and later inspector of other extermination camps. He developed and implemented procedures for dealing with Jews brought to the camps to ensure their death as quickly as possible in the gas chambers
Photo: public domain

Public execution of ten Jews by hanging in Zduńska Wola in 1942.
Photo: AIPN



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In the early spring of 1942, the Germans began to liquidate the smallest ghettos throughout the General Government, resettling their inhabitants to larger towns near the railway lines. These resettlements further exacerbated the extreme poverty of the Jews, leading to even tighter living conditions and widespread hunger. It was soon decided that Operation Reinhardt will begin with the liquidation of the Lublin Ghetto, which at that time was inhabited by more than 37 thousand people. On the night of 16–17 March 1942, part of the district was surrounded by German police units. At midnight, people were forced out of their homes. In the following days, columns of terrified Jewish men, women and children were led to the railway loading yard, where they were forced to board freight wagons. The trains from there were bound for the extermination camp at Bełżec. Those still remaining in the ghetto were informed that their relatives, friends and acquaintances had left for "labour camps in the East," where they would be allowed to live in peace and safety.

BEGINNING OF OPERATION REINHARDT



Julius Schreck Lublin Barracks, the building that housed the headquarters of Operation Reinhardt. Currently the seat of the Faculty of Law, Canon Law and Administration of the Catholic University of Lublin at Spokojna Street
Photo: NAC



Nazi Party Headquarters occupied Lublin. Currently the Polish Soldiers' Home at Żwirki i Wigury Street
Photo: NAC



Grodzka Gate (the Jewish Gate) in Lublin, which led to the ghetto
Photo: NAC



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A SERIES OF CRIMES



The extermination of the Lublin Ghetto initiated the complete liquidation of ghettos throughout the General Government. It lasted until 1943 and also included the Białystok District, which had been incorporated into the Third Reich. In each of the cities, the liquidation proceeded in a similar way – the ghetto was surrounded by police units and its inhabitants were assembled in a town square. Buildings were searched, and those who were hiding, the elderly, the disabled, and hospital patients were killed on the spot. The Germans and collaborators following their orders (former Soviet prisoners of war who had crossed over to the enemy's side) then led the Jews in columns to the nearest railway station, shooting those unable to keep the pace. Small labour detachments remained in place, whose members searched the houses in the following days, collecting any valuable items they found. After their work was completed, members of these groups were shot or confined in forced labour camps.



First transport of Jews from the Jedrzejów Ghetto to the German extermination camp at Treblinka, 16 September 1942.

Photo: public domain

Residents of the Warsaw Ghetto driven out by the Germans to the railway yard

Photo: AIPN



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FACTORIES OF DEATH

During Operation Reinhardt, the destination of most transports with people from the ghettos was one of the three extermination camps – Bełżec, Sobibór or Treblinka II. Many men, women and children already died in the wagons, crushed to death or due to lack of air and water, wounds and injuries and psychological shock. When the trains arrived, the prisoners were let out of the wagons and told to leave their luggage and personal belongings behind. They were then instructed to go to specific buildings, told that they were bathhouses where they would be allowed to bathe. The victims, stripped naked, were locked in the gas chambers and then internal combustion engines were started, emitting carbon monoxide to the inside. In other camps, Zyklon B pellets saturated with deadly hydrogen cyanide were poured into the chambers. The agony of the victims was often long and painful. In the meantime, other Jewish prisoners were sorting through luggage and clothes, looking for money and valuables. The bodies were buried in mass graves or burned in crematoria.



Displacement of Jews from Siedlce
Photo: AIPN



Jews in a railway carriage bound for an extermination camp
Photo: public domain

BELŻEC

Bełżec extermination camp, located by the Warsaw-Lublin-Lviv railway line, opened on 17 March 1942, when the first transports of Jews from the Lublin and Lviv Ghettos arrived. In the following months, trains carrying to their deaths the residents of dozens of towns in the Lublin District (Biłgoraj, Izbica, Kraśnik, Lubartów, Zamość and others), the Kraków District (Jarosław, Jasło, Kraków, Rzeszów and others) and the Galicia District (Brody, Drohobych, Kolomyja, Stanisławów and others) were sent there. Among them were Jewish citizens of Austria, Germany, the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, and Slovakia, who had previously been resettled in the General Government. The total number, in the span of only a few months, was approximately 450 thousand people.

In December 1942, the number of the bodies of the dead was so high that there was a risk of an outbreak of disease. At that time, the German authorities decided that the dead bodies should be burned and the camp was to be liquidated. Part of its infrastructure was transferred to the German concentration camp KL Lublin, and the staff was relocated. This liquidation ended in June 1943.



The Bełżec camp staff, initially headed by Christian Wirth, and from 1 August 1942 by Gottlieb Hering

Photo: AIPN



The interior of one of the gas chambers in Bełżec, where a total of four thousand people could be killed at the same time.

Photo: AIPN



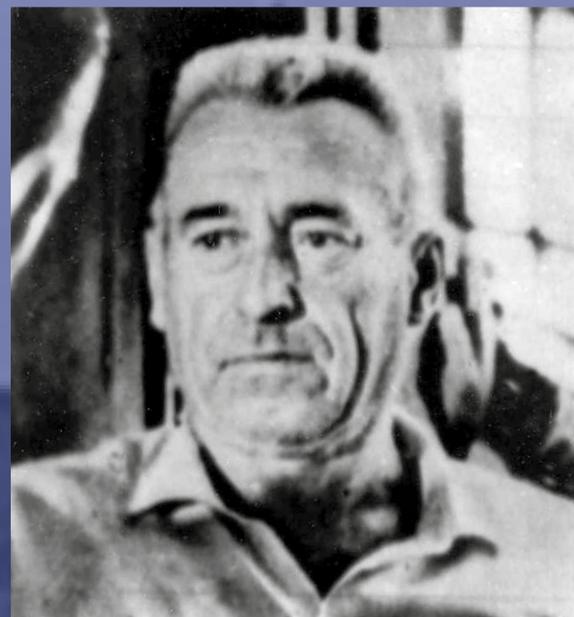
Human remains and personal effects of Bełżec extermination victims

Photo: AIPN

The railway station in the village of Bełżec before 1939.

Photo: AIPN

SOBIBÓR



Franz Stangl (1908–1971). He headed the Sobibór camp crew from the beginning of its operation until August 1942, when Franz Reichleitner assumed command
Photo: AIPN



Gustav Wagner (1911–1980). Considered to be the most cruel member of the German guard staff of Sobibór. He was notorious for murdering Jews brought here with his bare hands, shovels and axes. He tormented children with extreme cruelty
Photo: AIPN

The Sobibór extermination camp – located by the Chelm-Włodawa railway line – probably began operations in May 1942. Transports from ghettos and labour camps from the Lublin district (Chełm, Hrubieszów, Włodawa and others) were bound mainly there, but also from the District of Galicia (Drohobycz, Sambor, Stryj and others). Jews from Białystok, Lida, Minsk and Vilnius were also murdered in the camp. Sobibór was also the final destination for people from France, the Netherlands, Slovakia and the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. The number of people killed in Sobibór is estimated at approximately 180 thousand men, women and children.

On 14 October 1943, prisoners who formed an underground organisation in the camp led to a revolt, as a result of which approximately 200 people escaped. This contributed to the German decision to liquidate the camp entirely.

The gate leading to the Sobibór extermination camp
Photo: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

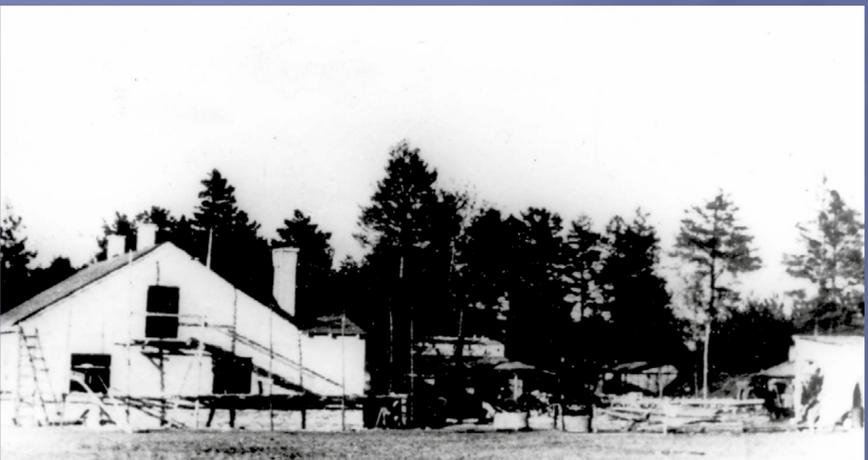


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TREBLINKA II



An excavator digging mass graves for Jews murdered in the chambers at Treblinka
Photo: AIPN



Some of the camp buildings at Treblinka
Photo: AIPN

The Treblinka extermination camp, located by the Siedlce-Małkinia railway line, was the last camp to be opened (in July 1942) during Operation Reinhardt, but it was also the largest. The Germans systematically sent transports there from Warsaw and many ghettos in the Warsaw District (Otwock, Minsk Mazowiecki, Wołomin and others), as well as from the Radom District (Częstochowa, Kielce, Radom and others). Many Jews from the Lublin region were also sent there to be killed (Biała Podlaska, Dęblin, Parczew, Radzyń Podlaski and others) and from the Białystok District (Białystok, Wołkowysk, Zambrów and others), and also from Slovakia, the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, the Greek city of Thessaloniki, and the areas of Thrace and Macedonia occupied by Bulgaria, which was allied with the Third Reich. In total, approximately 850 thousand people.

On 2 August 1943, members of the camp underground, reinforced by insurgents from the Warsaw ghetto brought to Treblinka, staged a revolt during which some of the buildings were set on fire and approximately 300 prisoners managed to escape. The camp was soon liquidated.

Information board at Treblinka
Photo: AIPN



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KL LUBLIN (MAJDANEK)

The German concentration camp in Lublin, commonly referred to as "Majdanek," also became an important part of Operation Reinhardt. As early as December 1941, hundreds of Jews from the Lublin region were imprisoned here and forced into slave labour. Starting the following year, transports of Jewish inmates from Slovakia, the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, Austria and Germany regularly arrived at the camp. Initially only men were left in the camp, while women and children were sent to ghettos in the Lublin region, from where they were then transported to extermination camps. Over time, the situation changed and entire transports of prisoners were left in the camp, mostly from Warsaw and Białystok. It is estimated that between the opening of the camp and July 1944, at least 74 thousand Jewish people were held there, of whom at least 59 thousand lost their lives.



German prisoners of war holding cans of Zyklon B, which was used to kill people in gas chambers
Photo: AIPN

Camp barracks and watchtower
Photo: AIPN



Crematorium furnaces with burnt human remains inside
Photo: AIPN



One of the camp buildings housing guard quarters
Photo: AIPN





OPERATION HARVEST FESTIVAL

In the autumn of 1943, the Germans proceeded to liquidate the last ghettos in the General Government and the Białystok District. The few Jews who survived the deportations were imprisoned in concentration camps and forced labour camps. Prisoner revolts at Treblinka and Sobibór reinforced the conviction among the Germans that survivors would resist before being sent to die. As a result, a decision was made to immediately exterminate all Jews residing in the Lublin region. This operation was kept under a secret codename: "Erntefest" ("Harvest Festival").

The operation was carried out on 3 and 4 November 1943 at the concentration camp KL Lublin and forced labour camps in Trawniki and Poniatowa. In two days, the Germans shot 42 thousand people there.

A photograph showing the exhumation of the victims of the German concentration camp KL Lublin (Majdanek), autumn 1944.
Photo: AIPN



Bodies of victims uncovered during exhumations carried out in July 1944, on the grounds of the German concentration camp KL Lublin
Photo: AIPN



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KL AUSCHWITZ

The largest site of extermination of European Jews was the Auschwitz concentration camp complex, located in the town of Oświęcim that had been annexed by Germany. One part of it was the KL Birkenau (Auschwitz II) camp, the construction of which began in the autumn of 1941. Over time, it became a site of mass extermination of the Jewish population. In order to improve this process, four gas chambers were built (it is estimated that each one of them was capable of killing two thousand people at a time) and four crematoria for burning the bodies of the dead. They started operating in the spring of 1943. Regular transports of Jews were brought to Birkenau (Auschwitz II) from the Polish lands incorporated into the Third Reich, the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, Slovakia, France, Hungary, Greece, Yugoslavia, Italy and Norway. Most of the people in each transport were immediately sent to the gas chambers. By the beginning of 1945, almost one million Jewish men, women and children had been murdered there.

Aerial view of the gate of the former concentration camp at KL Auschwitz, the 1970s.
Photo: NAC



Selection of a transport of Hungarian Jews on the railway ramp of the camp at KL Birkenau (Auschwitz II). The camp gate is visible in the background.
Photo: Public domain



KL Auschwitz inmates performing earthwork
Photo: AIPN



RESISTANCE AND SURVIVAL

Many ghetto residents, not believing the Germans' assurances that they would be deported to safe "labour camps in the East," decided to try to save their and loved ones' lives. Fugitives from enclosed communities used the help of friendly Poles, hid in the forests and joined partisan units. In some of the ghettos of occupied Poland, underground groups and organisations were formed calling for armed resistance against the Germans. Although they had no chance of victory, given the lack of weapons and ammunition, it was a form of protest against voluntary submission to the immoral, genocidal policy of the Third Reich and its allies. Not only the revolts of the prisoners at Treblinka II and Sobibór, but also the struggles in the ghettos of Częstochowa and Białystok are related to Operation Reinhardt. The largest act of resistance was the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, which was initiated on 19 April 1943 by members of the Jewish Combat Organisation and the Jewish Military Union. It was bloodily suppressed by the Germans.

German soldiers burning buildings in the Warsaw Ghetto
Photo: AIPN

Es gibt keinen
jüdischen Wohnbezirk
- in Warschau mehr!

The title page of the so-called Stroop Report, describing suppression of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. The war criminal gave his report the following title: "The Jewish Quarter of Warsaw Is No More!"

Photo: AIPN

STOJ!
STREFA ZAKAZANA!

Wstęp do byłej żydowskiej dzielnicy mieszkaniowej jest najsurowiej zakazany.

Każdy, kto bez nowej ważnej przepustki będzie napotkany w b. żydowskiej dzielnicy mieszkaniowej, będzie zastrzelony.

Wszystkie przepustki, uprawniające do wstępu do byłej żydowskiej dzielnicy mieszkaniowej, wystawione przed 23 kwietnia 1943 utraciły swą ważność.

Warszawa, dnia 23 kwietnia 1943 r.

Dowódca SS i Policji w Okręgu Warszawskim

(-) Stroop

Dowódca brzozy, SS i general brzozy

An announcement to Poles, issued by Jürgen Stroop after the outbreak of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising
Photo: public domain



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Jürgen Stroop, the commanding officer of the suppression of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising (centre - wearing a cap and decorations on his tunic) with his subordinates
Photo: AIPN

The ongoing extermination of European Jews during World War II, carried out with vicious consequences by the Third Reich and its allies, claimed the lives of **APPROXIMATELY 5.1 5.8 MILLION MEN, WOMEN AND CHILDREN**. It is estimated that approximately **2 MILLION** of them were **MURDERED** during **OPERATION REINHARDT**. The death of the victims in executions and gas chambers and as a result of hunger and disease coincided with **WIDESPREAD LOOTING** of their possessions, including money, precious metals and stones, clothing, footwear and various other items. The value of the property seized by the German authorities has been estimated at **APPROXIMATELY 187 MILLION** marks. After the end of the war, only a handful of the perpetrators were brought to justice and answered for their inhumane acts.



Jews with their meagre belongings heading for the Warsaw ghetto
Photo: AIPN



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THE OUTCOME OF THE CRIMES