

THE “FINAL SOLUTION”

Introduction

Although the Nazis came to power in 1933, it wasn't until the second half of 1941 that Nazi policy began to focus on the annihilation of the Jewish people. This evolution in policy coincided with Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941. Nazi leaders saw the invasion of the Soviet Union not only as a bid to gain territory that they felt was vital for Germany, but as an ideological struggle. The brutality of the invasion coalesced with racial antisemitism to further radicalize anti-Jewish policies since Jews were seen as the racial and ideological archenemy—especially the stereotype that Jews were the creators and primary agents of Bolshevism.

Historians note that on July 31, 1941, Hermann Goering, Hitler's second in command, sent an official order to Reinhard Heydrich, the head of the security branch of the SS, to authorize a “Final Solution of the Jewish Question.” The exact meaning behind this order is still debated among many Holocaust scholars. Current research shows that mass systematic killing of Jewish men in the newly conquered territory of the Soviet Union began in June, and by August included women and children as well. There is no surviving order by Hitler to expand the murderous activities to encompass all Jews under Nazi control, but most scholars believe such an order was given in the autumn of 1941, or at the latest early in 1942. Even if the exact sequence of events regarding the order is unknown, the fact remains that mass murder continued swiftly, and soon spread to Poland and other European countries. By the end of 1941, many hundreds of thousands of Jews had been murdered; eventually approximately six million Jews would be murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators.

The latest research reveals that although the tone of Nazi anti-Jewish policies came from the highest centers of power in Germany (Adolf Hitler and his senior officials), Nazi officials of lower ranks often had much leeway in the actual implementation and even initiated various aspects of policy. This idea of those at lower levels taking initiative has been called by the British historian Ian Kershaw “working toward the Fuehrer” (Hitler). Throughout the Nazi period there is a dynamic between the “center” and the “periphery” regarding anti-Jewish activities—while the responsibility for anti-Jewish activities rested primarily with the top leaders, there were many other people of different levels in Nazi German society who made a choice to serve the regime.

July 31, 1941
letter to Reinhard
Heydrich from
Hermann
Goering.

Hermann Goering (Göring)



Reinhard Heydrich

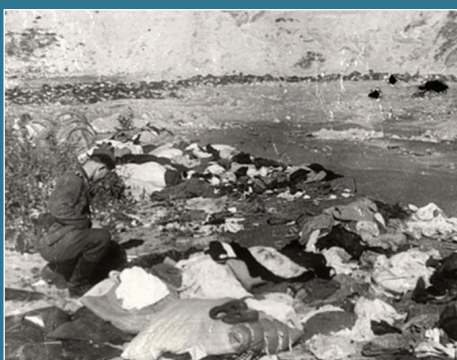


Einsatzgruppen

When “Operation Barbarossa” (German code name for Germany’s invasion of the Soviet Union) began, the Einsatzgruppen, special SS killing units, followed the German army, the Wehrmacht. Their job was to search for opponents of the Reich, including Communists and all Jews—and execute them. There were four units of Einsatzgruppen; the largest unit was composed of 1,000 men. These groups alone did not carry out the destruction of Soviet Jewry—wherever they went, ordinary German soldiers, German police units, and local collaborators were active participants. By spring 1943, the Einsatzgruppen and their collaborators had murdered 1.5 million Jews and hundreds of thousands of others, including Soviet prisoners of war and Sinti-Roma.

The Einsatzgruppen killed their victims—men, women, and children—by gathering them along the edges of ravines, mines, ditches, or pits dug specifically for this purpose. First, they would force Jews to hand over their possessions and remove their clothing. Then they would shoot them and throw the bodies into ditches that often had been dug beforehand by Jews themselves. In this way many Jewish communities were destroyed entirely.

Among the bloodiest massacres was that which occurred at Babi Yar, just outside of Kiev, Ukraine in late September 1941. There, close to 34,000 Jewish men, women, and children were murdered over the course of two days.



About Photos

Left: Einsatzgruppen about to shoot Jews on the outskirts of Kovno, 1941–1942.

Right: A German policeman searching through clothes of murdered Jews, Babi Yar, Ukraine, October 1941. Courtesy of Hessisches Hauptstaatsarchiv

The Extermination Camps

The mobile killing squads proved to be problematic for the Nazi leaders. They required large numbers of executioners, the men suffered from psychological repercussions, and it was difficult to conceal the killing from the surrounding populace. A new method was therefore devised, aimed at solving a number of these issues. First, instead of the killer coming to the victims, the victims would now be brought to “killing centers.” The new system of murder by gassing served to reduce the direct contact between the killers and their victims, making the murderers’ task easier.

A new phase in the reign of terror was reached when the “Final Solution” was formulated, and extermination camps were constructed with the expressed purpose of killing Jews. Unlike other enemies of the Third Reich, all Jews in Nazi-occupied territory were destined for extermination. In the words of Elie Wiesel, himself a former camp inmate, “While not all victims were Jews, all Jews were victims.”

Six camps were considered to be extermination camps. From across Europe, Jews were deported, most commonly like animals in cattle trains, to be slaughtered en masse at these sites. All of the camps—Chelmno, Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka, Auschwitz-Birkenau, and Majdanek—were in

occupied Poland which had the largest prewar Jewish community in Europe. For the most part, the Nazis tried to hide their activities from the local population.

With the exception of Auschwitz-Birkenau and Majdanek—which were also places of detention and labor—the camps had only one purpose: the Jews brought to the extermination camps were to be killed. Jews would arrive at the camp, usually after having spent several days in transit with little or no food or water, and within a few hours after reaching the camp, they would all be dead.

In Auschwitz-Birkenau and Majdanek some transports would go through a selection; however, the vast majority of the arrivals were sent directly to the gas chambers; few were selected for labor. The entire procedure was planned for the greatest possible efficiency. In order to prevent panic, which could impede the killing, the victims were deceived into believing that they were going to have showers. Their personal possessions were taken from them, and they undressed. After their deaths their possessions and even hair and gold fillings were used by the authorities for different purposes. The perpetrators created a system that functioned like an “assembly-line” procedure that has come to be known as industrialized mass murder.

There are few survivors of the four sites that were exclusively extermination camps, since most of the people who reached them were sent immediately to the gas chambers. In these camps, very few prisoners’ lives were spared in order to work in the crematoria and in other camp functions. More prisoners survived Majdanek and Auschwitz since, as slave laborers, they were not killed immediately. As a rule, the Nazi exploited slave laborers to the point of death, whereby they were either selected again, this time to be gassed, or died from exhaustion and related complications. Those who survived did so despite the Nazis’ murderous intentions. Those who did survive the extermination camps tell of the unimaginable horrors they experienced there every day.



About Photos

Left: Transfer from the deportation trains to cattle cars at the Kolo Station, Lodz, Poland. Yad Vashem Photo Archive (1602/270)

Right: A Magirus van found after the war, suspected as a gas van used for murder in Chelmno camp, Kolo, Poland. Yad Vashem Photo Archive (1264/2)

The Perpetrators

Hundreds of thousands of people were involved, either directly or indirectly, in implementing the “Final Solution,” the policy of systematically mass murdering Jews. Some actually engaged in murdering Jews. Others played a role in the bureaucratic process of ordering Jews from their homes to the sites of murder and arranging murder operations. Others became guards or transported Jews to the places where they would be killed. A great many people benefited from the worldly possessions left behind by the murdered Jews, and in this way they too became complicit in the murder process.

The core organizers and planners of the annihilation of European Jewry came from the ranks of the Nazi Party and the SS, who in general fervently believed in Nazi ideology. The driving force of the murders was the SS, among whom were commanders of killing units and Nazi camps; however, it is important to emphasize that the SS members were not the only ones who were actively involved in

carrying out the “Final Solution.” There were many groups involved from Germany, their allies in the war, and from the lands they occupied. In addition to the SS men, soldiers from the Wehrmacht, and the German police forces took part in these activities. Officials from the civil apparatus that the Germans maintained in the occupied lands also participated in implementing the “Final Solution.”

For a wide range of reasons, people from the nations that fell under Nazi domination or were allied with the Nazis also took part in the “Final Solution,” either directly or indirectly. Some were motivated primarily by their acceptance of Nazi ideology; others were of German heritage and willingly took up the offer by the Nazi authorities to become their partners; others collaborated with the Nazis in the hope that it would further their own national political agenda; others joined the Nazis in order to ameliorate their own or their family’s suffering under the brutal occupation; and still others joined the Nazis in order to escape almost certain death as prisoners of war on the Eastern Front. Regardless of how the door to collaboration swung open, many non-Germans became full and frequently enthusiastic participants in the mass systematic murder of European Jews.

Because of the broad spectrum of people involved in the murder of the Jews in one way or another, responsibility for the murder rests on society as a whole during this period.