

The Warsaw Ghetto

During World War II, the Germans established ghettos throughout Europe that separated Jews from the rest of the population and isolated Jewish communities from each other. This allowed Nazis to maintain control and arrange deportations to forced labor, concentration, and extermination camps. In October 1940, just over a year after Germany invaded Poland, the Nazi regime required all Warsaw's Jewish citizens and those from nearby towns to move to a designated area. This area, sealed off from the rest of the city, eventually held over 400,000 people—more than a third of the local population—but comprised less than five percent of Warsaw's land area.

The Nazis established a Judenrat (Jewish Council) to uphold order inside the ghetto. The Judenrat did not know the Reich's ultimate plan demanded the complete extermination of all European Jews. They cooperated with the Nazis in vain hope of saving lives. Jewish council members who refused to cooperate were often killed or transported to one of the camps.

Food allotments rationed by the German authorities were not enough to sustain life. As a result, a black market developed. Countless Jews sold their few remaining possessions in order to purchase food or medicine. Between 1940 and 1942 nearly 100,000 people died of illness and starvation while living inside the Warsaw Ghetto.

At the Wannsee Conference in January 1942, the Nazis decided on what they called “The Final Solution,” the systematic murder of all Jews living within the Reich. They established extermination

camps with specialized gas chambers capable of killing large numbers of people. From July until October 1942, the Nazis sent more than 300,000 Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto to Treblinka, an extermination camp in a sparsely populated area fifty miles outside of Warsaw. Information trickled back to the ghetto about what was taking place there.

Several Jewish resistance groups decided to fight back with smuggled guns and homemade weapons. The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was the largest and most important opposition effort organized by the Jewish resistance during World War II. On April 19, 1943, the ghetto fighters opened fire on German SS and police when they attempted to deport the remaining Warsaw Jews.

Despite being vastly outnumbered and short of weapons, the ghetto fighters inflicted heavy casualties in the first days of the battle. Germans began burning the ghetto building by building to flush out the fighters. They regained control of the ghetto and, on May 16, 1943, German General Jurgen Stroop ordered the destruction of the Great Synagogue on Tlomackie Street as a symbol of German victory. The 56,000 Jews that remained in Warsaw were either shot or transported to extermination camps.