

THE "FINAL SOLUTION"

The origin of the "Final Solution" - the Nazi plan to exterminate the Jewish people - remains uncertain. What is clear is that the genocide of the Jews was the culmination of a decade of Nazi policy under the rule of Adolf Hitler. The "Final Solution" was implemented in stages. After the Nazi party rise to power, state-enforced racism resulted in anti-Jewish legislation, boycotts, "Aryanization," and finally the "Night of Broken Glass" pogrom, all of which aimed to remove the Jews from German society. After the beginning of World War II, anti-Jewish policy evolved into a comprehensive plan to concentrate and eventually annihilate European Jewry.

The Nazis established ghettos in occupied Poland. Polish and western European Jews were deported to these ghettos. During the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, mobile killing squads (Einsatzgruppen) began killing entire Jewish communities. The methods used, mainly shooting or gas vans, were soon regarded as inefficient and as a psychological burden on the killers.

After a conference in 1942, the Nazis began the systematic deportation of Jews from all over Europe to six extermination camps established in former Polish territory - Chelmno , Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka, Auschwitz-Birkenau, and Majdanek. Extermination camps were killing centers designed to carry out genocide. About three million Jews were gassed in extermination camps.

In its entirety, the "Final Solution" consisted of gassings, shootings, random acts of terror, disease, and starvation that accounted for the deaths of about six million Jews -- two-thirds of European Jewry.

THE GHETTOS

Millions of Jews lived in eastern Europe. After Germany invaded Poland in 1939, more than two million Polish Jews came under German control. After Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, several million more Jews came under Nazi rule. The Germans aimed to control this sizable Jewish population by forcing Jews to reside in marked-off sections of towns and cities the Nazis called "ghettos" or "Jewish residential quarters." Altogether, the Germans created at least 1,000 ghettos in occupied territories.

The largest ghetto was in Warsaw, the Polish capital, where almost half a million Jews were confined.

Many ghettos were set up in cities and towns where Jews were already concentrated. Jews as well as some Roma (Gypsies) were also brought to ghettos from surrounding regions and from western Europe. Between October and December 1941, thousands of German and Austrian Jews were transported to ghettos in eastern Europe. The Germans usually marked off the oldest, most run-down sections of cities for the ghettos. They sometimes had to evict non-Jewish residents from the buildings to make room for Jewish families. Many of the ghettos were enclosed by barbed-wire fences or walls, with entrances guarded by local and German police and SS members. During curfew hours at night the residents were forced to stay inside their apartments. Overcrowding was common. One apartment might have several families living in it. Plumbing broke down, and human waste was thrown in the streets along with the garbage. Contagious diseases spread rapidly in such cramped, unsanitary housing. People were always hungry. Every day children became orphaned, and many had to take care of even younger children. Orphans often lived on the streets, begging for bits of bread from others who had little or nothing to share. Many froze to death in the winter.

In order to survive, children had to be resourceful and make themselves useful. Small children in the Warsaw ghetto sometimes helped smuggle food to their families and friends by crawling through narrow openings in the ghetto wall. They did so at great risk, as smugglers who were caught were severely punished.

MOBILE KILLING SQUADS

After the German army invaded the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, a new stage in the Holocaust began. Under cover of war and confident of victory, the Germans turned from the forced emigration and imprisonment of Jews to mass murder. Special action squads, or Einsatzgruppen, made up of Nazi (SS) units and police, moved with speed on the heels of the advancing German army. Their job was to kill any Jews they could find in the occupied Soviet territory. Some residents of the occupied regions, mostly Ukrainians, Latvians, and Lithuanians, aided these German mobile killing squads by serving as auxiliary police.

The mobile killing units acted swiftly, taking the Jewish population by surprise. The killers entered a town or city and rounded up all Jewish men, women, and children. They also took away many Communist party leaders and Roma (Gypsies). Victims were

forced to surrender any valuables and remove their clothing, which was later sent for use in Germany or distributed to local collaborators. Then the killing squad members marched their victims to open fields, forests, and ravines on the outskirts of conquered towns and cities. There they shot them or gassed them in gas vans and dumped the bodies into mass graves.

The killing squads murdered more than a million Jews and tens of thousands of other innocent people. At Babi Yar, near Kiev, about 34,000 Jews were murdered in two days of shooting. Only a few people in the general population helped their Jewish neighbors escape. Most people were afraid that they too might be killed.

The massacres of innocent men, women, and children were not the crimes of hoodlums or crazy men. The executioners were "ordinary" men who followed the orders of their commanding officers. Many of the killers had wives and children back in Germany. Propaganda and training had taught many members of the mobile killing squads to view their victims as enemies of Germany. Some killers drank heavily to dull their thoughts and feelings. In addition, when they described their actions they used code words like "special treatment" and "special action" instead of "killing" or "murder" to distance themselves from their terrible crimes.