

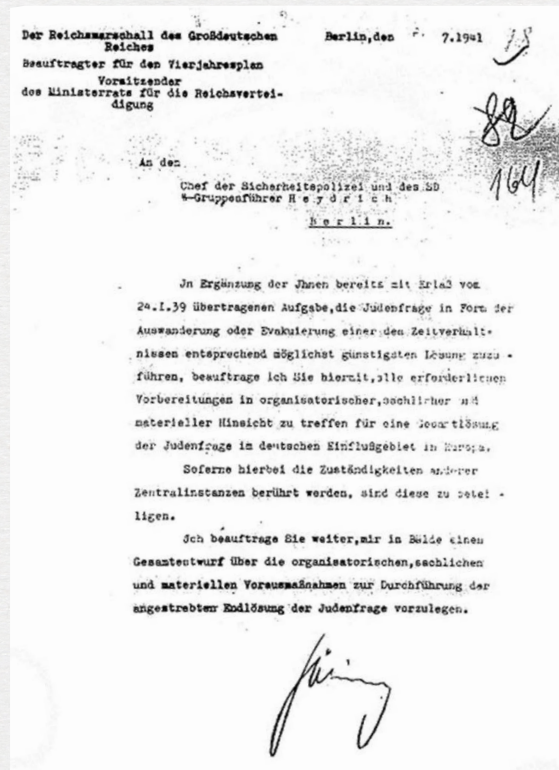
## INTRODUCTION

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 mass murder of the Jewish people. This policy change came with Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941 in an attempt to gain territory. Nazi leaders saw the invasion of the Soviet Union as an ideological struggle to the death between Nazism and communism. They falsely viewed the Jews as the primary agents of this communism. The brutality of the invasion, combined with Nazi racial antisemitism, caused anti-Jewish policies to become more radical and extreme. The policy of systematically mass murdering the Jews came to be called the "Final Solution" by the Nazis.

Current research shows that mass systematic killing of Jewish men in the Soviet Union began in June 1941. By August, women and children were targeted as well. There is no record of a written order by Hitler expanding the murderous activities to include all Jews

under Nazi control, not just in the Soviet Union. However, 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, authorizing a "Final Solution of the Jewish Question." The exact meaning behind this order is still debated among many Holocaust scholars. Most scholars believe the order for expanding the systematic mass murder was given orally in the autumn of 1941, or at the latest early in 1942. At that time, mass murder escalated, and soon spread to Poland and other European countries. By the end of 1941, many hundreds of thousands of Jews had been murdered.

Another significant step took place on January 20, 1942, when Reinhard Heydrich arranged a meeting to coordinate the implementation of the Final Solution. It was held in Wannsee, Germany. Representatives of the main branches of the German government, both military and political, attended the conference.



## ABOUT PHOTOS

Bottom Left: Hermann Goering (Göring)

Bottom Right: Reinhard Heydrich

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



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

The records of the meeting include a list of the Jewish population of each European country. The Wannsee Conference did not launch the Final Solution, as historians once thought, but it proves that the murder of the Jews was a project of the Nazi German government. Eventually, approximately six million Jews would be murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators.

The tone of Nazi anti-Jewish policies came from the top centers of power – Adolf Hitler and his senior officials. However, research shows that lower ranking Nazi officials had the freedom to initiate and implement parts of this policy. The idea of those at lower levels taking initiative has been called “working toward the Fuehrer” (Hitler) by the British historian, Ian Kershaw. This was a phenomenon throughout the Nazi period. While the responsibility for anti-Jewish activities rested primarily with the top leaders, there were many other people from different levels in Nazi German society who made a choice to serve the regime.

## EINSATZGRUPPEN

When the German invasion of the Soviet Union (code-named “Operation Barbarossa”) began, special SS killing units called “Einsatzgruppen” followed the German army into this territory. Their job was to search for opponents of the Reich – including Communists and all Jews – and execute them. There were four units of Einsatzgruppen with fewer than 4,000 men combined, which was not enough to carry out the destruction of Soviet Jewry. So ordinary German soldiers, German police units, and local collaborators joined the Einsatzgruppen as active participants in the murder process.

According to the latest research, Einsatzgruppen and their collaborators eventually murdered at least 2 million Jews and hundreds of thousands of others, including Soviet prisoners of war and Sinti-Roma. The Einsatzgruppen killed their victims—men, women, and





Einsatzgruppen about to shoot Jews on the outskirts of Kovno, 1941-1942. Courtesy of Hessisches Hauptstaatsarchiv

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 by Jews themselves. In this way, many Jewish communities were destroyed entirely. One of the bloodiest massacres occurred at Babi Yar, near Kiev, Ukraine, in September 1941. There, close to 34,000 Jewish men, women, and children were murdered over the course of two days.

In all, over one-third of the Jewish victims of the Holocaust were murdered in these mass shootings.

## EXTERMINATION CAMPS

The mobile killing squads proved to be problematic for Nazi leaders. They required large numbers of executioners and the killers suffered from

psychological trauma due to the intimacy of the murder. It was also difficult to conceal the killing from the surrounding population. Even as the squads continued their murderous work, a new method was devised to solve a number of these issues. First, instead of the killers coming to the victims, the victims would now be brought to “killing centers.” In addition, a new system of murder by gassing would reduce direct contact between the killers and their victims, making the murderers’ task easier. The Nazis created special camps for murder, which they called “extermination” camps. This reflected their ideology, which saw Jews as less than human, like pests to be “exterminated.”

These camps brought about a new phase in the Holocaust. Unlike other enemies of the Third Reich, all Jews in Nazi-occupied territory were destined for annihilation. In the words of Elie Wiesel, a former camp inmate, “While not all victims were Jews, all Jews were victims.” Six camps were considered to be “extermination” camps. From all across Europe, Jews were deported, usually like animals in cattle trains, to be slaughtered in large groups at these sites. All of these camps 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 by building these camps in or near forests and away from towns and villages.

Four of the camps had only one purpose – murder. They were: Chelmno, Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka. Except for a few prisoners who were made to serve the needs of the camp, the Jews brought to these sites were all killed. Jews would arrive at the camp – usually after several days in transit with little or no food or water – and within a few hours, they would all be dead.



## ABOUT PHOTOS

Left: 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)

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

The other two camps were places of detention and labor in addition to functioning as death camps. These were Auschwitz-Birkenau and Majdanek. Most Jews who arrived at these camps would go through a selection, where Nazi doctors determined who would be used for slave labor and who would be killed immediately. The vast majority of the arrivals were sent directly to the gas chambers. The rest were selected for labor.

The entire procedure was planned for the greatest possible efficiency. In order to prevent panic among the prisoners, which could slow down the killing process, 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 their hair and gold fillings were used by the authorities for different purposes. The perpetrators created a system that functioned like an "assembly-line" and 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 Nazis exploited slave laborers to the point of death, when 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 and they tell of the unimaginable daily horrors that they experienced.

## THE PERPETRATORS

Hundreds of thousands of people were involved, either directly or indirectly, in implementing the Final Solution. 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 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 Final Solution policy came from the ranks of the Nazi Party and the SS, who in general strongly believed in Nazi ideology. The driving force of the murders was the SS, including commanders of killing units and Nazi camps. However, SS members were not the only ones who were actively involved in carrying out the Final Solution. There were many groups involved from Germany, from their allies in the war, and from the lands they occupied. In addition to the SS men, soldiers from the Wehrmacht (the German army) and the German police forces took part in the murderous policy. Officials and administrators in German-occupied lands also participated in implementing the Final Solution.

For a wide range of reasons, many people who were from Nazi occupied countries or who were allied with the Nazis also took part in the Final Solution. Some were motivated by their acceptance of Nazi ideology or were of German heritage and willingly partnered with Nazi authorities. Others collaborated in the hope that it would further their own national political agenda or lessen their own or their family's suffering under the brutal occupation. 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 often enthusiastic participants in the mass systematic murder of European Jews. Because of the broad spectrum of people involved, responsibility for the murder rests on society as a whole during this period.