

The Holocaust in France

After the 1789 Revolution, France was the first European country to emancipate Jews. Despite periodic resurgences of anti-Semitism, France was one of the most attractive countries for European Jews fleeing persecution. By 1939, about half of the 330,000 Jews who lived in France were recent refugees from elsewhere in Europe.

France was invaded by German troops in the spring of 1940. After a few weeks of fighting, an armistice was signed on June 22. According to the treaty, Germany annexed Alsace and Moselle, and occupied the north of France. The south, which remained unoccupied, was administered by a new French government headed by Marshal Pétain, who established an authoritarian regime and collaborated with Germany. The decision to work with the invader created the opportunity for Pétain's government, commonly referred to as the Vichy government, to create a 'new' France in the unoccupied zone. In the fall of 1940, as an effort to 'purify' French society, the Vichy government established anti-Jewish legislation nearly identical to that put in place in German-occupied France. Jews were excluded from public life, administration and the army, and could no longer practice liberal professions or work in commerce and industry. In July 1941, the government also put in place a vast "aryanization" program by which all Jewish goods became property of the French state.

On May 29, 1942, the German authorities made it compulsory for Jews to wear a yellow star within the occupied zone. Deportations to concentration and death camps started shortly thereafter. During the summer of 1942, the Germans and the French police began rounding up and arresting Jews in the occupied and unoccupied zones. Most of the Jews who were arrested and deported were foreign Jews that the Vichy government sacrificed in an attempt to spare French Jews. However, after the German invasion of the unoccupied zone in November 1942, French Jews were also deported, mainly to Auschwitz.

In total, about 77,000 of Jews living in France died in concentration camps, death camps (the vast majority were killed in Auschwitz-Birkenau), or detention centers in French territory. One third of these victims were French citizens.

Text adapted by the Montreal Holocaust Museum

Source: Paul Webster, "The Vichy Policy on Jewish Deportation" (2011):

http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/genocide/jewish_deportation_01.shtml#two; and

USHMM article about France: <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/fr/article.php?ModuleId=129>