

## The Holocaust in Poland

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The history of the Jews in Poland dates back to the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Jews who immigrated to Poland were attracted by the tolerance (in relative terms) and the large number of economic activities accessible to them. However, at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the situation deteriorated for Jewish communities as a result of religious fanaticism, and blood libels (false accusations that Jews killed gentiles to obtain their blood for rituals). Anti-Jewish sentiments continued to grow among the Polish population. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, increasing Polish nationalism encouraged antisemitism and frequent pogroms. Furthermore, the Jewish population of Poland became increasingly poorer due to anti-Jewish policy and the general poverty that affected the entire country. On the other hand, in educational, cultural, and political communal activities, the Jews enjoyed a large measure of freedom, and sometimes obtained state support and encouragement. On the eve of the outbreak of World War II, Poland had a Jewish population of 3.3 million.

As soon as the Germans invaded Poland, Jews became targets of discrimination. The decrees forcing Jews to wear a Star of David on their clothing, and to mark their businesses as Jewish intended to humiliate and isolate them from the rest of the population. Assaults against Jews, looting Jewish homes and stores, and the confiscation of Jewish property became common. Poland's Jewish population was forced to reside in enclosed 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. The overcrowding, starvation, general shortages, and lack of adequate sanitation facilities made life in the ghetto extremely difficult. Between 1942 and 1945, ghettos were liquidated and their inhabitants were sent to concentrations camps, where they were assigned forced labour, or to death camps, where they were killed upon arrival.

Poland was liberated by Soviet troops in March 1945. Discrimination against Jewish communities continued, as the immediate postwar years were marked by several violent antisemitic incidents like the 1946 Kielce pogrom, throughout the country. While antisemitism was rife in Poland, many Polish citizens, like Barbara Makuch, also risked their lives to help the Jews.

Text adapted by the Montreal Holocaust Museum

Source: Entry about Poland in the *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust* (vol 3, edited by Israel Gutman), and USHMM article about the ghettos in Poland: <https://www.ushmm.org/outreach/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007706>