

Aktion Reinhard Camps

About two million Jews inhabited the *Generalgouvernement* (Nazi-occupied Poland), which was divided into the districts of Warsaw, Radom, Kraków, Lublin, and Eastern Galicia. With that fact on his mind, Hans Frank, the head of the *Generalgouvernement*, assembled his top officials on December 16, 1941, and told them that Reinhard Heydrich, head of the Reich Security Main Office, was planning an important conference. Frank's deputy, Dr. Josef Bühler, would attend on Frank's behalf.

On January 20, 1942, Bühler was one of 15 Nazi leaders at the Wannsee Conference, which facilitated the "Final Solution." There he urged that the *Generalgouvernement's* Jewish question should be "solved as quickly as possible."

To honor Heydrich, who had been assassinated by Czech Resistance fighters in the late spring of 1942, the SS used the code name *Aktion Reinhard* to refer to the destruction of the *Generalgouvernement's* Jews. Even before the Wannsee Conference, however, plans for the mass murder were in motion. Directed by SS officers Odilo Globocnik and Christian Wirth, the scheme included construction of three camps whose fundamental purpose was to kill

Jews. Staffed by SS and police, quickly trained Ukrainians, and former managers of Nazi Germany's so-called "euthanasia program," Belzec, Sobibór, and Treblinka would become death factories. More than 1.7 million Jews, most of them from the *Generalgouvernement*, were gassed during the 21 months of *Aktion Reinhard*, from March 1942 to November 1943.



Compactly designed, the camps' brick-and-lumber layout called for ordinary gasoline and diesel motors to produce carbon monoxide for the gas chambers. Four factors determined the camps' locations: large Jewish populations in the vicinity; nearby railroad lines to ensure transportation; isolated locales for security; and proximity to the *Generalgouvernement's* eastern border to maintain the opera-

tion's "cover"—that the victims were being "resettled in the East."

Belzec, which opened on March 17, 1942, fit the criteria. It stood less than a half-mile from the rail station at a village on the main line between the cities of Lublin and Lvov. Belzec killed about 600,000 Jews. Sobibór, where full-scale killing started in the spring of 1942, also took advantage of a major railroad line, which brought some 250,000 Jews to its gas chambers. Treblinka, which was northeast of Warsaw, launched its mass exterminations on July 23, 1942. Linked to the Warsaw-Bialystok rail line, this remote camp, like the others, was also close to hundreds of trapped and starving Jewish communities. When Treblinka closed in the autumn of 1943, it had claimed between 700,000 and 900,000 Jewish lives.

Escape attempts took place in each camp, and uprisings erupted in Treblinka and Sobibór. However, few Jews survived any of these lethal places. The corpses, though, were many. They were initially buried in mass graves. Later they were burned, including those that were exhumed as the Germans tried to erase the evidence of their crimes.

1942

Poland and from as far away as the western provinces of Germany. By the end of 1942, 600,000 Jews will be murdered there.

- March 17–April 14, 1942: Nearly 30,000 Jews from the Lublin (Poland) Ghetto are deported to the Belzec death camp.

- March 19, 1942: Nazis arrest and deport to Auschwitz 50 Jews from Kraków, Poland, as part of an operation directed against Jewish intellectuals.

- Late March 1942: Fifteen thousand Jews are deported from Lvov, Ukraine, to Belzec.