

Context card 2: The outbreak of the Second World War



German troops enter the Polish town of Piotrkow

On the 1st September 1939 **Nazi Germany** invaded Poland, in response to this, on the 3rd September, Britain and France declared war on Germany. The Second World War had begun. Poland was defeated in a matter of weeks and was brutally occupied by Nazi Germany in the West and the Soviet Union in the East. Many non-Jewish Poles would also die at the hands of the Nazis during the Second World War. For many of 'The Boys' they became trapped from the very first days following the German invasion.

'I was eleven years old when the war broke out and the nightmare began. I always say that at the age of eleven I became an adult, and five years later I became an old man.' Harry Golde (Harry was born in Plock, in Poland, 1929. Quoted in Martin Gilbert 'The Boys' p. 1)

The Nazis had been in power in Germany since 1933. Germany's Jews had already suffered years of **persecution** and **discrimination** including violent



attacks at the hands of the Nazis. The Nazis wrongly believed that Jewish people belonged to a ‘race’ that was both inferior and dangerous and they saw them as a threat. During the time of war the Nazis saw Jewish people as an even greater threat. To try to deal with what they saw as a Jewish ‘problem’ in occupied Poland, the Nazis ordered that entire Jewish communities should move to areas of towns or cities which would become **ghettos**. These were only to be temporary as the Nazis wished to remove all Jews from Europe. As the war went on and Nazi Germany took control of more land and more countries they set up thousands more ghettos across Eastern Europe.

The first ghetto was established in Poland by October 1939 in the town of Piotrkow. The largest ghettos in Poland were in the cities of Warsaw and Lodz. In all of the ghettos conditions were terrible, they were made deliberately so by the Nazis. There was severe overcrowding and a lack of basic facilities, leading to the outbreak of deadly diseases. Starvation and violence were commonplace and many thousands died as a result.

