

Context card 3: Europe's Jews in the Second World War

Following the invasion and occupation of Poland, Nazi Germany continued to expand their territory throughout 1940. By the summer of 1940 they controlled much of Western Europe. In all of the countries that they controlled, the Nazis discriminated against Jewish people.

In the summer of 1941 Nazi Germany invaded the **Soviet Union**. This was a brutal invasion in which millions of civilians died. Following the German Army were special units called *Einsatzgruppen*. They had orders to shoot anyone who worked for the Soviet government or was a **communist**. The order quickly extended to Jews who worked for the government. The *Einsatzgruppen* began to murder all Jewish men and by August 1941, Jewish women and children were being killed as well. This shooting of Jewish people, close to their homes continued. In these operations the *Einsatzgruppen* were helped by thousands of other people, sometimes the non-Jewish neighbours of the victims. It is estimated that by 1944 2,200,000 people had been murdered in this way.

In German-occupied western Poland Nazi leaders wanted to make their area free from Jews, the majority of whom, like many of 'The Boys' were now living in ghettos. One idea was to move the Jewish population further east or even to the island of Madagascar, but eventually it was decided that this goal would be achieved through murder. On the 8th December 1941 the first gassings of Jewish people took place in the village of Chelmno. Chelmno was the first **death camp** in history, in which victims were killed in gas vans. In 1942 other death camps operated in German-occupied Poland, Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka, Majdanek and Auschwitz-Birkenau (which was also a **concentration camp** and **slave labour camp**).





Deportations of Jewish people from across Europe to the death camps took place until 1944. The majority of Europe's Jews were murdered between March 1942 and February 1943. By the summer of 1943 these deportations had destroyed more than three thousand Jewish communities across Poland. All that remained of Poland's pre-war Jewish population were those imprisoned in a much reduced Lodz ghetto, a few thousand in hiding and several thousand slave labourers, amongst whom were many of 'The Boys', who would continue to suffer brutal treatment and hardship. This mass murder of Jewish people in Europe during the Second World War, at the hands of the Nazis and their collaborators, is known as the Holocaust.

