



The Holocaust Educational Trust

Ghettos

A-Level Extension Tasks

Introduction

The following activity is intended for use with students aged 16 and over, and assumes the form of a source-work exercise. Students should read through the excerpts of expert interviews and respond to the questions with extended essay-style answers. Whilst referring directly to the relevant historian(s) in their response, students should also be encouraged to utilize all resources available to them via the WW2history.com website.

CHRISTOPHER BROWNING: The ghettos are there as the warehouses to collect the people you're going to expel. Jews are spread all over Poland, and many of them live in small villages. The initial order from Heydrich is very clear, bring the Jews to cities at railheads, and concentrate them there. What he exempts from that concentration order was the area of Lublin, because that's where they're going to be sent to. So that was the initial impetus for ghettoisation, which authorises and allows local authorities to ghettoise, the ghetto effectively being, in a sense, an urban internment camp where the Jews will be stored until they can be shipped. No one realized when they initially started that they were going to get stuck and so when, for instance, they ghettoise the Jews of Lodz, and the order went out in January of 1940 and the ghetto was actually closed in May of '40, the timetable was they were going to be expelled in August. This was a very short term notion. So come August and there is no place to expel them because England has not been defeated and the war is still going on.

So ghettoisation is something that Heydrich authorises as a preliminary to expulsion, local officials throughout Poland now can do this and they do it at different stages in different ways, different timetable, but, it ends up and is justified as a temporary action. When temporary becomes longer than short term temporary, and becomes a matter of years rather than weeks and months, they then face the question of how to sustain the ghettos at no cost to the Third Reich. Because you've severed all the economic ties of these people, they have no way of making a living, and that's when you then get people arguing for creating ghetto economies; to harness Jews in the ghettos to work in industries supporting the German war effort. But that's a second stage. The initial impetus for forming ghettos was simply to gather people, concentrate them as a preliminary for expulsion.

TASK: How crucial is the policy of ghettoisation to our understanding of the Holocaust?

LAURENCE REES: But there's a conceptual difference, isn't there, between sealing a city and saying we need people to die, we need to reduce the population, and what they're doing with the Jews?

MARY FULBROOK: I think this is a difficult one because when you're looking at the Wehrmacht you're looking at, what, 15 or 17 million young men, many of whom were conscripted, many of whom hated what they were doing, many of whom had absolutely no choice in their lives about where they were sent and what they were doing and what they were involved in. I think the really crucial problem there is the people who did have a choice, who did have a say, who did have power and influence and didn't say or do the right things at the right time, and I think you have very different reactions. What shocks me in the primary sources on people's reactions: diaries, letters home, that kind of stuff, is the extent to which young people who had been exposed to Nazi ideology in the 1930s but didn't fully believe it, suddenly, naively, came to see Jews in ghettos: Eastern Jews, Jews who are in rags and starving and clearly carrying disease. These young people suddenly believe that the propaganda was true without recognising that it had been put into effect and made true by the Nazi treatment of these populations, and they then became more anti-Semitic as a result of exposure to this.

TASK: What was the correlation between propaganda, policy and murder – as seen in the example of the ghettos?