

Judenräte

Councils were established in German-occupied Poland and eastern Europe during World War II to implement German policies and maintain order in the ghettos to which the Nazis confined the country's Jewish population. Reinhard Heydrich, chief of Nazi Germany's Gestapo, established the Judenräte (singular: Judenrat) by decree on September 21, 1939, three weeks after the German invasion of Poland. No aspect of Jewish behaviour during the Holocaust was more controversial than the conduct of the Judenräte.

The Judenräte were composed of up to 24 Jewish men, chosen from "remaining authoritative personalities and rabbis." When the Judenräte were first established, the Jews did not know the ultimate intentions of the Germans toward them nor, according to most scholars, were the intentions of the Germans yet clear. Jewish leaders assumed that their responsibility was to provide for the needs of Jews, who they assumed would remain in the ghetto indefinitely. The Judenräte became a municipal authority providing sanitation, education, commerce, and food for their increasingly beleaguered community. With meager resources at their disposal, they struggled to meet the basic needs of starving ghetto residents and to make life bearable. Their German oppressors provided the basis of their power. At first unaware of their people's fate, in time they understood their role in maintaining communities destined for annihilation.

The Judenräte relied on forms of taxation to support their activities. Jewish police forces were established to enforce Judenräte decrees and provide order in the ghetto. The individual Judenräte used different models of governance. In Warsaw, the largest of the ghettos, laissez-faire capitalism was the rule under Judenrat chairman Adam Czerniaków. Private enterprise continued for as long as possible. In Łódź, under the chairmanship of Mordecai Chaim Rumkowski, authority was more centralized. Commerce, trade, and all municipal services, including the distribution of food and housing, were tightly controlled.

The level and tenor of interaction between the Judenräte and the Germans differed ghetto by ghetto, leader by leader, and meeting by meeting. Some meetings with Nazi officials were courteous and might even appear friendly, others were harsh and threatening. Generally, the Germans would make demands of the Judenräte, who, in return, would beg for supplies and relief on behalf of their beleaguered populations.

Among the ghetto residents, the Judenräte often drew anger. Many viewed their role in enforcing German decrees and conditions as indistinguishable from the role of the Germans who had ordered them. This anger grew when conditions in the ghettos deteriorated under an intensified German campaign of deprivation.

Perhaps the defining test of the courage and the character of Judenrat leaders occurred when the Germans ordered lists drawn up indicating those to be protected by work permits and those to be deported to concentration camps. Judenrat members knew that deportation meant near-certain death. Thus, while the Judenräte used tactics such as bribery, postponement, importuning, and appeasement to secure work permits for as

many residents as possible, only a specified number of work permits were available and decisions were required. This became especially wrenching when it came to children and the elderly, who were incapable of working.

In Łódź, Rutkowski cooperated with the deportations. He argued, “I must cut off the limbs to save the body itself. I must take the children because if not, others will be taken as well. The part that can be saved is much larger than the part that must be given away.” Similar decisions were made by Judenrat leaders in Vilna (now Vilnius, Lithuania) and Sosnowiec.

In Warsaw, Czerniaków committed suicide rather than participate in the deportation of children and the liquidation of the entire ghetto. “They have asked me to kill the children with my own hands,” he said in despair. To some Jews, Czerniaków’s suicide was an act of integrity. Others saw it as a sign of weakness and condemned his failure to call for resistance.

Leaders who openly refused to cooperate in delivering their own people to concentration camps soon paid with their lives. Dr. Joseph Parnas, first Judenrat leader of Lviv, Ukraine, refused an order to deport thousands of Jews and was shot, as were several other Judenrat leaders. Megalif, the leader of the Judenrat at Nieśwież (now Nesvizh, Belarus), marched to his death rather than participate in the deportation.

When the Germans ordered the final liquidation of the ghetto, there could be little pretense that many Jews could be saved. The Jewish resistance in several ghettos began to take control. While some Judenrat leaders, such as Dr. Elchanan Elkes of Kovno (now Kaunas, Lithuania) and his counterpart in Minsk (now in Belarus), Eliyahu Mushkin, cooperated with the underground and the resistance, most Judenrat leaders considered the resistance a threat to their efforts to maintain order and sustain the ghettos. As a consequence, Judenrat leaders and Jewish police were often the first to be assassinated by the Jewish resistance, even before direct battle with the Germans.

At the end of the war, virtually all Judenrat leaders, regardless of their level of accommodation with the Germans, were dead.