

A **Judenrat**^[a] (German: [ˈjuːdn̩ ʁaːt], "Jewish council") was a World War II administrative agency imposed by Nazi Germany on Jewish communities across occupied Europe, principally within the Nazi ghettos. The Germans required Jews to form a *Judenrat* in every community across the occupied territories.^[1]

The *Judenrat* constituted a form of self-enforcing intermediary, used by the Nazi administration to control larger Jewish communities. In some ghettos, such as the Łódź Ghetto, and in Theresienstadt, the Germans called the councils "Jewish Council of Elders" (*Jüdischer Ältestenrat* or *Ältestenrat der Juden*).^[2] Jewish communities themselves had established councils for self-government as early as the Middle Ages. The Jewish community used the Hebrew term *Kahal* (קהל) or *Kehillah* (קהילה), whereas the German authorities generally used the term *Judenräte*.^[citation needed]



Nazi considerations of Jewish legal status

The structure and missions of the *Judenräte* under the Nazi regime varied widely, often depending upon whether meant for a single ghetto, a city or a whole region. Jurisdiction over a whole country, as in Nazi Germany, was maintained by *Reichsvereinigung der Juden in Deutschland* (Reich's Association of the Jews in Germany) established on 4 July 1939.^[3]

In the beginning of April 1933, shortly after the National Socialist government took power, a report by a German governmental commission on fighting the Jews was presented. This report recommended the creation of a recognized 'Association of Jews in Germany' (*Verband der Juden in Deutschland*), to which all Jews in Germany would be forced to associate. Appointed by the Reichskanzler, a German People's Ward was then to assume responsibility of this group. As the leading Jewish organization, it was envisioned that this association would have a 25-member council called the *Judenrat*. However, the report was not officially acted upon.^[citation needed]

The Israeli historian Dan Michman found it likely that the commission, which considered the legal status and interactions of Jews and non-Jews before their emancipation, reached back to the Medieval Era for the term *Judenräte*. This illuminates the apparent intent to make the Jewish emancipation and assimilation invalid, and so return Jews to the status they held during the Medieval Era.^[citation needed]

Occupied territories



The building of the Jewish Council in Warsaw, burned during the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising

The first actual *Judenräte* were established in occupied Poland under Reinhard Heydrich's orders on 21 September 1939, during the German assault on Poland, and later in the occupied territories of the Soviet Union.^[1]

The *Judenräte* were to serve as a means to enforce the occupation force's anti-Jewish regulations and laws in the western and central areas of Poland, and had no authority of their own. Ideally, a local *Judenrat* was to include rabbis and other influential people of their local Jewish community. Thus, enforcement of laws could be better facilitated by the German authorities by using established Jewish authority figures and personages, while undermining external influences.^[citation needed]

Further *Judenräte* were established on 18 November 1939, upon the orders of Hans Frank, head of the *Generalgouvernement*. These councils were to have 12 members for Jewish communities of 10,000 or fewer, and up to 24 members for larger Jewish communities. Jewish communities were to elect their own councils, and by the end of 1939 were to have selected an executive and assistant executive as well. Results were to be presented to the German city or county controlling officer for recognition. While theoretically democratic, in reality the councils were often determined by the occupiers. While the German occupiers only minimally involved themselves in the voting, those whom the Germans first chose often refused participation to avoid becoming exploited by the occupiers. As a rule, therefore, the traditional speaker of the community was named and elected, preserving the community continuity.^[citation needed]

Missions and duties



Applying for identification and work permits from Kraków Ghetto Jewish Council

The Nazis systematically sought to weaken the resistance potential and opportunities of the Jews of Central and Eastern Europe. The early *Judenräte* were foremost to report numbers of their Jewish populations, clear residences and turn them over, present workers for forced labour, confiscate valuables, and collect tribute and turn these over. Failure to comply would incur the risk of collective punishments or other measures. Later tasks of the *Judenräte* included turning over community members for deportation. Ultimately, these policies and the cooperation of Jewish authorities led to massive Jewish deaths with few German casualties because of the minimal resistance. Once under Nazi control and checked for weapons, large numbers of Jews could ultimately be easily murdered or enslaved. The sadness of the catastrophically large number of deaths because of this lack of resistance led to the saying "never again".^[4]

Through these occupation measures, and the simultaneous prevention of government services, the Jewish communities suffered serious shortages. For this reason, early *Judenräte* attempted to establish replacement service institutions of their own. They tried to organize food distribution, aid stations, old age homes, orphanages and schools. At the same time, given their restricted circumstances and remaining options, they attempted to work against the occupier's forced measures and to win time. One way was to delay transfer and implementation of orders and to try playing conflicting demands of competing German interests against each other. They presented their

efforts as indispensable for the Germans in managing the Jewish community, in order to improve the resources of the Jews and to move the Germans to repeal collective punishments.^[citation needed]

This had, however, very limited positive results. The generally difficult situations presented often led to perceived unfair actions, such as personality preferences, sycophancy, and protectionism of a few over the rest of the community. Thus, the members of the community quickly became highly critical of, or even outright opposed their *Judenrat*.^[citation needed]

Tadeusz Piotrowski cites Jewish survivor Baruch Milch stating "Judenrat became an instrument in the hand of the Gestapo for extermination of the Jews... I do not know of a single instance when the Judenrat would help some Jew in a disinterested manner." through Piotrowski cautions that "Milch's is a particular account of a particular place and time... the behavior of Judenrat members was not uniform."^[5]

While some scholars have described the institution of the Judenrats as a collaborationist one,^{[6][7][8]} the question of whether participation in the Judenrat constituted collaboration with the Germans remains a controversial issue to this day.^{[9][10][11]}

Ghettos



Jewish police in the Węgrów Ghetto

Judenräte were responsible for the internal administration of ghettos, standing between the Nazi occupiers and their Jewish communities. In general, the *Judenräte* represented the elite from their Jewish communities. Often, a *Judenrat* had a group for internal security and control, a Jewish Ghetto Police (German: Jüdische Ghetto-Polizei or Jüdischer Ordnungsdienst). They also attempted to manage the government services normally found in a city, such as those named above. However, the Germans requiring them to deliver community members for forced labor or deportation to concentration camps, placed them in the position of cooperating with the German occupiers. To resist such orders was to risk summary execution, or quick replacement and inclusion in the next concentration-camp shipment.^[citation needed]

In a number of cases, such as the Minsk ghetto and the Łachwa ghetto, *Judenräte* cooperated with the resistance movement. In other cases, *Judenräte* cooperated with the Germans.^[citation needed] The view that Jewish councils collaborated in the Holocaust has been challenged by Holocaust historians including Isaiah Trunk in his 1972 book, *Judenrat: The Jewish Councils in Eastern Europe Under Nazi Occupation*. Summarizing Trunk's research, Holocaust scholar Michael Berenbaum writes: "In the final analysis, the Judenräte had no influence on the frightful outcome of the Holocaust; the Nazi extermination machine was alone responsible for the tragedy, and the Jews in the occupied territories, most especially Poland, were far too powerless to prevent it."^[12]