

Minsk

Pre-1941: Minsk, capital of the Minsk oblast' and the Belarusian SSR; **1941-44:** capital of the Minsk district (*Gebiet*) and of German-occupied western Belarus (*Generalkommissariat Weissruthenien*); **post-1944:** capital of the Minsk oblast' and the Belarusian SSR (post-1991: Republic of Belarus)

Pre-war Jewish population of Minsk

In the period from 1900 to 1930, like many other towns in Belarus (i.e. Vitebsk, Gomel, etc.), Minsk was a predominantly Jewish city.¹ Yiddish was one of four official languages and education was available in Yiddish, Belarusian, Polish and Russian. At the beginning of Stalin's rule, Belarus, like many other republics, was targeted for "Russification," which meant that many Belarusian poets, writers, intellectuals and nationalists were arrested, deported or killed. The Jewish population declined as proportion of the total in the city to only 70,998 (or 29.71%) in 1939.²

German invasion and occupation of the city

The German invasion commenced on Sunday June 22, 1941 at 3:30 a.m., when German troops crossed the western border and aircraft started bombing targets in the Soviet Union. The war was undeclared and achieved almost complete surprise. The Germans attacked in three main directions, one to the North aiming at Leningrad (now again St. Petersburg), one in the Center aimed directly through Minsk toward Moscow, and one in the South toward Kiev. The heaviest thrust was that toward Moscow, conducted by the two Tank Groups of Army Group Center.

German forces reached the outskirts of Minsk in only four days, arriving close to the city on the 26th. The bombing blitz of Belarus began immediately, continuing through June 26th. The Soviet authorities issued instructions for people not to panic, but to stay in their homes and continue reporting to work. The official evacuation by the Soviet authorities was not announced and the leading officials left with their families late on the night of June 24th. The Red Army tried to defend Minsk, but due to the German encirclement they were obliged to abandon the capital on June 28th, so that German

advance troops entered the city on the same day. This gave the majority of citizens almost no opportunity to evacuate. The rapid German advance effectively blocked all roads exiting Minsk, such that many of those attempting to flee had to return to the city.

Organization of the Minsk Ghetto

The Jews of Minsk, like most Belarusian citizens, were completely unprepared for the war and subsequent German occupation. They had been led to believe that even if Stalin's diplomacy failed, the Red Army would be able to defend the frontiers against all invaders. Following the Molotov-Ribentrop pact in 1939 and the partition of Poland³, a stream of Jewish refugees had entered western Belarus from Nazi-occupied Poland, fleeing the atrocities there. Many shared stories that were difficult for Belarusian Jews to comprehend, especially those who had experienced the relatively benign German occupation in the First World War.

Under Soviet rule the Minsk Jews were accustomed to living side by side with their Belarusian and Russian neighbors. The state policies supporting atheism declared that all people were equal. Before the war many Jews were active in the Communist party and many served as high ranking political leaders and officials. Two Jews who were in the NKVD⁴ had streets in Minsk named after them: Volodarsky and Uritsky⁵.

When the order to form the Minsk ghetto was issued by the German Field Commandant on July 19, 1941, the Minsk Jews were unfamiliar with the concept of a ghetto, but they moved reluctantly to the newly formed segregated section of town. The Jews were given only five days to move from their homes into the ghetto. They could only take with them what could be carried by hand. Many were still resettling into the ghetto at the end of July and some even at the end of August. Non-Jews also had to move out of the ghetto area. The official order made it clear that any Jews found outside the ghetto without permission would face severe punishment; German guards and local police had instructions to shoot on sight. The ghetto was formed within the boundaries of Colhozni Lane and Colhozny Street, Nemiga Street (excluding the Orthodox church), Respublikanskaya, Shornaya, Collectornaya, Mebelny Lane, Perekopsksaya, Nizovaya Streets, the wall of the Jewish Cemetery, Obuvnaya Street, the Second Lane of Opanskogo and Zaslavskaya Street up to the corner of Colhozni Street (see map).⁶

Minsk Ghetto Jews were required to identify themselves by wearing a yellow piece of fabric in the shape of a circle, 10 cm diameter, affixed to their clothing on the front and back, as well as another small rectangular piece of fabric giving their name and address. This label was later a crucial means of identifying and punishing all family members and the neighbors of any Jew who was caught trying to escape or found to be involved in the underground or partisan activities. Orders were also issued that Jews had to take off their caps off in front of any German, on pain of death. All Jews were ordered to remain within the ghetto confines at all times, which at first were simply a defined territory, but later were fenced off with parallel rows of barbed wire reaching higher than an average man's height. All Jews were required to spend the night only in the house listed on their clothing and they could be shot for failure to comply.

Forced Labor and Living Conditions in the Minsk ghetto

Jews who were able to work were assigned to forced labor squads. At work they received a meager supply of food and in rare instances small amounts of money. No other food or provisions were made for ghetto inmates, thus failure to join a forced labor squad meant death by starvation. Those able to work were supplied with 100 grams of bread per day and a watery soup (balanda) – barely enough to feed a laborer, but certainly not enough to feed his or her family members. Labor squads were used to run the brush factory, the radio factory, to build the Sherokia concentration camp, to rebuild parts of Minsk, to run the main heating plants, to clean and service the train stations, to cook and clean for the Germans and so forth. Jews that were able to find places on the forced labor squads were issued an *Ausweis* – a German document naming them as valued laborers – this document could mean the difference between life and death.

Jewish forced laborers often attempted to trade articles of value (i.e., clothing, jewelry and household items) with Belarusians they encountered in the city for items of food (potatoes, potato skins, carrots, flour, &c.) in order to supplement their meager rations and to bring home food for their children and non-working family members. Likewise children were often sent under the ghetto fence into the city, begging from former neighbors and others, or trying to barter articles of value for food. If they were caught escaping or re-entering the ghetto they were shot dead.

Electricity to the ghetto was cut off and no candles, heating or cooking fuel was supplied. The only heat available during the fiercely cold winters for ghetto inmates was that made by their breaking apart furniture, walls, floors, and the like, to burn in the wood burning ovens common to houses of that era. Ghetto inmates were so starved that they recall collecting nettles and grass inside the ghetto and trying to make soup from it, and even running to collect the bones from discarded German meals that were sometimes thrown their way.

Typhus spread throughout the ghetto once the inmates became weakened from the dire living conditions. Children whose parents were killed or died of starvation were often absorbed into other families or given to the orphanage that operated within the ghetto. There was also a hospital inside the ghetto, serving those with typhus and other diseases. During the pogrom of March 2-3, 1942, which occurred during the Jewish holiday of Purim, the Nazis came into the Minsk ghetto orphanage and stabbed to death all the children they found there.

A bakery (which still exists) operated within the ghetto confines, but its bread was for the Germans and never distributed within the ghetto. Aside from the hospital, the Judenrat headquarters, the Jewish police, and the orphanage, most normal social institutions did not exist within the ghetto. There were no shops, no schools, no restaurants and no theater performances within the ghetto – only conditions of starvation and death. Individuals continued to pray, but the only services held were the sometimes-spontaneous Kaddish dirges cried out following the round-ups and mass killings.

Numbers of people in the Ghetto

The Minsk ghetto is thought to have housed about 80,000 Jews by the fall of 1941, with about 55,000 of these having been local Minsk Jews and the remainder from western Belarus.⁷ Despite the mass murders and killing actions, additional Jews came into the ghetto. In November 1941 the first transports of West European Jews began to arrive. Likewise, when some ghettos in the Minsk region were liquidated, the skilled laborers were saved and brought to the Minsk ghetto. Escaped Jews often migrated to the relative safety of the Minsk ghetto rather than wander among hostile Germans and Belarusians who were afraid to offer them lasting shelter.

Pogroms, Raids and Killing “Actions” Within the Ghetto

The ghetto was constantly subject to raids, pogroms and killing actions. Almost every night some house within the ghetto was broken into by bandits, local or imported police, or Germans coming to steal from, rape and kill the inhabitants. Ghetto survivors state that the living conditions were not comparable to a European concentration camp because “at least there you knew at night when you had managed to live through the day that you would not face death again until the next day of horrors, but in the Minsk ghetto the terror was non-stop, 24 hours a day, extending beyond the daytime horrors into nightly killing, raping and looting raids from which no one was protected.”⁸

The Nazi plan to decimate the Jewish population of Minsk was carried out at first by dire living conditions and then accelerated by official “killing actions” or pogroms, which occurred on the following dates, with the respective approximate number of Jews killed:

November 7, 1941 – up to 13,000 -10,000 with estimates ranging from 12,000-17,000

November 20, 1941 – 7000 -approximately 10,000

March 2-3, 1942 – 3412⁹ 5000 to 6000 including 300 children

July 28, 1942 - 18,000¹⁰ to 30,000¹¹

October 21-23, 1943 - final killing action in the ghetto. Reports vary about the numbers living in the Minsk ghetto and surviving to the very end. Some survivors say only a handful survived, perhaps twenty children, while others report that up to a thousand persons hid during the final action and managed to escape¹². It’s believed that 100,000 are the total number of Minsk ghetto victims from 1941 through October 1941.

During the various pogroms the Germans generally used Latvian, Lithuanian and Ukrainian police to aid them in cordoning off an area of the ghetto selected for “liquidation”. The non-German police accompanied by German SS-men went door-to-door, ordering the inhabitants out of their houses and searching for those in hiding. Once out on the street the Jews were formed into columns with those able to display an “Ausweis” or work permit often spared, being allowed to step aside with their family members. “Extra” family members were often saved in these instances. Likewise

'employers' often tried to preserve their workers by keeping them overnight in the factories before and during the days of the large killing actions in the ghetto.

In the first weeks of these night "actions" many Jews constructed hiding places or '*malenas*' in false walls, attics, walled off rooms, basements and so forth, where they attempted to hide during the killing actions. Of course the Germans and their collaborators discovered this method of hiding and searched for false walls, sometimes riddling areas they could not reach with bullets.

During some of the killing actions Minsk Jews were rounded up and forced into gassing trucks called 'soul killers'¹ in Russian by the Minsk Jews. These windowless, closed trucks opened from the back and could hold from 60 to 100 persons. The exhaust pipe of the truck was rigged so that the fumes entered this closed compartment; as a result those inside were gassed to death by the time the trucks arrived at burial pits or in Maly Trostinets, where the corpses were thrown into pits and later burned in a crematorium erected there.

In other cases the columns of Jews were loaded onto open trucks and driven to already prepared pits where they were ordered to undress and pile their clothing into stacks of dresses, blouses, skirts, shoes, socks, underwear, etc., and then they had to proceed naked to the edge of the pit, where they were shot point blank in the head. Bullets were not wasted on children who frequently were not shot but thrown into the pits and buried alive.

In one special action the most beautiful girls were rounded up and taken to the Yubilyana central square in the ghetto, where they were shot in the head with exploding bullets and left to bleed to death on the square.

Killing Units

Belarusian police were mainly employed to guard the Minsk ghetto. According to survivors, however, the most feared units were the Latvian and Ukrainian forces, although Lithuanian units (sent from Kaunas)¹³ also actively supported the Nazis during the various murderous pogroms.

¹ The Russian words literally translate to soul choking.

The Judenrat and Jewish Police

The Germans established a “Judenrat” in Minsk made up of so-called “representatives of the Jews”. According to an order posted in Minsk, the Jewish council was to consist of 12 persons in communities of less than 10,000 inhabitants and of 24 representatives in larger communities.¹⁴

In reality the Judenrat, or Jewish Council in Minsk was apparently formed when the Germans simply picked twelve Jews off the street in July 1941.¹⁵ The Jewish council and its chairman had strict orders to carry out all instructions from the German military administration in a careful and timely manner; the chairman and his vice chairman were to be held personally responsible for everything that occurred within the Jewish community. Forced contributions were demanded. The Germans required that the Judenrat collect “contributions” of 2 million Soviet rubles and 10 kilograms of gold in July of 1941, which was a huge sum of money at the time.¹⁶ These demands continued until there was nothing more to collect. The duties of the Jewish police were to keep order in the ghetto, organize work squads to collect and bury the dead, and to collaborate in finding and rounding up resistors. While some members of the Judenrat and police did collaborate in betraying Jews, for the most part they were compelled to serve in these positions and tried not to compromise themselves where possible.

Partisan and Underground Activities

The Minsk ghetto inhabitants began organizing resistance activities within the ghetto as early as August 1941¹⁷ and worked closely with the Minsk underground. One of the Minsk underground committee leaders, Issac Cazinetz was a Jew, but because of his non-Jewish appearance he was able to live hidden outside the ghetto. He was responsible for many of the links forged between the Minsk city underground and the ghetto. In May of 1942 he was arrested and publicly executed. He was posthumously decorated as a “hero of the Soviet Union.” Hersh Smolar and others worked to create and smuggle underground newspapers and even some arms into the ghetto. The underground’s most successful effort was in exploding a bomb under the bed of Generalkommissar Kube, killing him, although miraculously his pregnant wife who was also in the bed survived the blast. Severe retribution was visited upon both the city of

Minsk and the Minsk ghetto following this event. Unorganized resistance included sabotaging radios in the Minsk radio plant, smuggling arms and helping young people to escape and join the partisans, where they in turn fought the Nazis, blowing up train tracks and engaging in other forms of sabotage.

Those who were free of family commitments fled to the partisans, but those with family members still alive found it more difficult to leave, as this would mean probable starvation or punitive retribution for family and house mates left behind. It was not a simple matter to escape from the Minsk ghetto. Escapees had to find the partisans and it was difficult to travel without false documents concealing their Jewish identity. The partisans did not welcome everyone and generally required potential recruits to come with a weapon in hand, not an easy task for a Minsk ghetto inhabitant to achieve. It is estimated that as many as 10,000 Jews may have escaped from the ghetto. The Minsk underground helped many ghetto inmates seeking to join the partisans.

The Germans ruthlessly tortured and killed anyone suspected of resistance activities. On October 26, 1941 the Germans made a public display of hanging 12 individuals accused of resistance activities. One of the women hanged is believed to be Masha Bruskina a Jewish underground leader from the Minsk ghetto. No one was allowed to cut down the victims for several days.¹⁸

Levels of pre-war anti-Semitism were probably lower in Minsk than in many other Eastern European cities. Despite this, many Belarusians horrified at Nazi atrocities to Jews were afraid to help them. Orders posted throughout the country made it clear that to harbor or help a Jew was punishable by death. Many villages were burned to the ground with Belarusians trapped inside their homes when even one villager was suspected harboring partisans or Jews. A few Belarusian citizens hid ghetto children in their homes, adopting them during the war, or helping to hide them in orphanages. Others gave food to ghetto inmates who worked outside in the city. Yad Vashem has named at least 389 Belarusians (including a number from Minsk) as 'Righteous Among the Nations' for their rescue activities.¹⁹

Hamburg Jews and Trostinets

The first transports of Jews to Minsk from Western Europe began in November 1941. These Jews were transported by trains to the center of Minsk and taken from there directly into the Minsk ghetto. Upon arrival they were told to leave their suitcases and hand luggage at the station for later delivery to their new residences. Of course these items were never delivered. The first Jews to arrive from Western Europe were from Hamburg, hence the Minsk Jews called all of them – Hamburg Jews. The Jews from Western Europe were housed in a separate area of the Minsk ghetto, which had been cleared for them during the November 1941 pogroms. Many of the Hamburg Jews had been well off and in their first weeks in the Minsk ghetto were conspicuous in their better quality clothing. Soon, however, they grasped the realities of the ghetto that unless they found slave labor jobs, they were destined to starve to death. Unable to speak Russian, the Hamburg Jews relied on trading with the Russian Jews across the segregated area of the ghetto, bartering their clothing and other belongings to Minsk Jews who in turn exchanged them for money or food outside the ghetto.

Kube, the German commissar in Minsk, felt some sympathy for the Hamburg Jews and tried in vain to save them by writing to Nazi headquarters, pleading in their behalf.²⁰ However, his appeals were denied and the Hamburg Jews met a similar fate to the Minsk Jews. In time the Germans established a killing center at Maly Trostinets, on an estate just outside of Minsk, near the village of the same name. Some of the western Jews were then taken by train directly to this killing center. Upon disembarking they were also separated from their belongings, and taken to pits where they were shot dead.

The “soul killer” gas trucks were also used to kill Minsk Jews from the ghetto and deliver them to Trostinets to be buried in the pits. An eyewitness at Trostinets²¹ recalls that those who arrived still alive from the gas trucks were shot upon arrival.

In 1943 the Germans became aware that their crimes might be discovered and they began exhuming corpses from the killing pits and burning them in a newly established crematorium. Later bodies of Jews and other enemies of the Germans were placed directly into these crematoriums and some persons are claimed to have been burned alive in the crematoriums.

The Trostinets killing center housed a very small number of Jews who helped serve the functions of the killing center, but very little other labor occurred on the estate. One witness who was briefly held on the estate²² and another who was sent by the partisans to witness from the forests nearby and report back on events occurring there²³ verify the arrival of the “soul killer” trucks and the existence of the mass graves.

Published sources and significant secondary works

The personal accounts written by Hersh Smolar, which differ in their various editions, partly due to diverging political pressures at different times, provide a valuable first hand account of resistance: see Hersh Smolar, *The Minsk Ghetto: Soviet-Jewish Partisans against the Nazis* (New York: Holocaust Publications, 1989).

Shalom Cholawsky is the author of two articles on the ghetto: ‘The German Jews in the Minsk Ghetto’ in *Yad Vashem Studies*, vol. 17 (1986), pp. 219-246 and ‘The Judenrat in Minsk’ in *Patterns of Jewish Leadership in Nazi Europe, 1933-1945: Proceedings of the Third Yad Vashem International Historical Conference Jerusalem, April 4-7, 1977* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1979) pp. 113-132.

Dan Zhits, *Geto Minsk Ve-toldotav, Le'or Ha-teud Ha-hadash* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Rubin Mass, 2000)

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Main archival sources

Captured German documentation on the Minsk ghetto can be found in the Bundesarchiv (BAL), U.S. National Archives (NARA), the National Archives of the Republic of Belarus in Minsk and a number of other archives. Most useful also are the German criminal investigations, which can be examined most conveniently at the Bundesarchiv, Aussenstelle Ludwigsburg.

Survivor testimonies can be examined at Yad Vashem, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum and several other main repositories for written, oral and video testimonies. The author has also made use of a number of interviews she conducted in Minsk, which are in her own personal archive.

Anne Speckhard

¹ According to the Russian Empire census of 1909, the Jewish population of Minsk comprised 43.3% of the total population, followed by Russians at 34.8%; Poles at 11.4%; Belarusians at 8.2%; and Tatars at 1.3% (Z. Shibeko “Minsk. The Pages of Life of the Pre-revolutionary City”, Minsk, 1990, page 11).

² Mordechai Altshuler (ed.), *Distribution of the Jewish Population of the USSR 1939* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Centre for Research and Documentation of East-European Jewry, 1993) p. 38.

³ Western Belarus (ethnically Belarusian areas) had fallen under Polish control according to the Riga treaty of 1921 and later in 1939 was taken back by Stalin when Stalin and Hitler divided the sphere of interest in Europe in the Molotov-Ribentrop pact.

⁴ The NKVD is the forerunner of the Soviet KGB secret service.

⁵ Uritsky Street was renamed in the 1990's to Gorodskoy Val. The Belorussian spelling (in English) of Volodarsky is Valadarsky.

⁶ The order to create the Minsk ghetto was published in the Minsk Gazetta, July 27, 1941 #1 and posted throughout the city; see also NARB, 4683-3-397, pp. 6-7 and 359-1-8, pp. 1-2 and *The Nazis Crimes in Belarus. 1941-1944*, Minsk, 1963, page 21.

⁷ A Soviet partisan report from October 1942 gives the total of 80,000 Jews in the Minsk ghetto, including those brought in from the surrounding districts, see NARB, 4-33a-645, p. 84 Interview with a member of N.M. Nikitin's Guerrilla Brigade on the situation in Minsk, October 8, 1942. Numbers in ghetto 100,000, **[I will probably deal with this, MD.]**

⁸ **Personal Interview with Frieda Raisman**, personal archive of author.

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¹⁰ Testimony of Hess recorded in: recorded in: Sudebniy protsess po delu o zlodzeyaniyah sovershennyh nemetsko-fashistskimi zahvatchikami v Belorusskoy SSR (The Trial over the Nazis in Belarus, shorthand record). Minsk 1947, page 184. **Also page 384-85 of court proceedings**

¹¹ Testimony of Pinhus Dobin recorded in: Sudebniy protsess po delu o zlodzeyaniyah sovershennyh nemetsko-fashistskimi zahvatchikami v Belorusskoy SSR (The Trial over the Nazis in Belarus, shorthand record). Minsk 1947, page 202.

¹² Witness M. Brudner showed on July 18, 1944 that only 1,000 Jews survived in Minsk in 1944, see *The Nazis Crimes in Belarus. 1941-1944*, Minsk, 1963, page 182.

¹³ Kaunas troops

¹⁴ Instructions about the formation of the Judenrat were included in the order to create the Minsk ghetto, which was published in the Minsk Gazetta, July 27, 1941 #1 and posted throughout the city.

¹⁵ Minsk newspaper **[Details?]**

¹⁶ See, USHMM, RG-30, Accession 1999.A.0196 (U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, RG-242, T-175), reel 233, Ereignismeldung UdSSR, No. 36, July 28, 1941.

¹⁷ Hersh Smoler, *The Minsk Ghetto: Soviet-Jewish Partisans against the Nazis* (New York: Holocaust Publications, 1989) **p. ?**

¹⁸ On the evidence regarding Masha Bruskina, see Necama Tec and Daniel Weiss, 'A Historical Injustice: The Case of Masha Bruskina' in *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (1997) 366-77.

¹⁹ See YVA, collection M.31 for the relevant files on the 'Righteous Among the Nations' in Belarus.

²⁰ Kube letter on behalf of Hamburg Jews, **source?**

²¹ **Personal interview [with whom, date, archive (= personal archive of author?)]** personal archive of author.

²² **Personal interview** personal archive of author.

²³ **Personal interview** personal archive of author.