

Worksheet – Ghettos

One role of the Judenrat in the ghetto was to provide lists of people for deportation. When people were deported, they were sent to camps, where many of them were murdered. These stories reveal the profound moral dilemmas faced by Jewish leaders under Nazi occupation and highlight the impossible choices they had to make in an attempt to survive or to protect their communities.

Read the three case studies, and answer the questions below.

Case Study One – Joseph Parnes in Lvov

Dr Joseph Parnes was a Jewish community leader in Lvov ghetto during the Holocaust. When the Nazis occupied Lvov, they established a Judenrat of Jewish leaders to help manage daily life under occupation. Parnes was one of the members responsible for assisting the Nazis with their brutal policies. In November 1941, Parnes was asked to hand over Jews for deportation to the Janowska forced labour camp. Here, prisoners worked mostly at carpentry and metalwork; some were given meaningless jobs designed to exhaust them before sending them to their deaths. Parnes faced an impossible choice: comply with Nazi demands or resist, risking retribution against himself and possibly the whole community. Parnes chose to refuse. In retaliation, the Nazis killed him.

Case Study 2 - Adam Czerniakow in Warsaw

Adam Czerniakow was the head of the Warsaw Judenrat during the Holocaust. He was a respected engineer and a protector of his community, but he was forced into a difficult position. The Germans expected Czerniakow to implement German orders, including demands for forced labour and confiscations of Jewish-owned property. Czerniakow himself hoped to assist Jews in the ghetto, and he established food kitchens, workshops, and vocational schools. He constantly pleaded for better conditions for the Jews in the ghetto. In July 1942, the Nazis ordered Czerniakow to compile lists of Jews to be deported to concentration camps. Czerniakow struggled intensely with this task, knowing it meant the likely death of many. He tried to negotiate with the Nazis and sought ways to save Jewish lives, but he was powerless to stop the deportations. On 23 July, 1942, Czerniakow committed suicide to avoid participating in the deportations.

Case Study 3 - Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski in Lodz

Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski led the Lodz Ghetto's Judenrat. He was known as the "Elder of the Jews", and was completely responsible for everyday life in the ghetto: providing food, housing, heat, work, and health and welfare services for the suffering ghetto population. He believed that by cooperating and complying with the Nazis, he might be able to save Jewish lives.

Initially, Rumkowski tried to convince the Germans to reduce the number of Jews to be deported. However, the Nazis refused and then made Rumkowski responsible for deciding who was to be deported. Under Nazi orders, Rumkowski created lists of Jews to be deported to extermination camps or forced labour. During the first 5 months of 1942, 55,000 Jews from Lodz were sent to their deaths at Chelmno, based on Rumkowski's lists.

Rumkowski's role is controversial because some view him as a victim of Nazi exploitation while others see him as someone who enabled the Holocaust's horrors. His story reflects the tragic complexities faced by Jewish leaders who had to make difficult choices to try and preserve their communities amidst genocide.

Questions

1. Outline a key ethical dilemma facing Judenrat in the ghettos.
2. Describe the different ways each of the men in the case studies dealt with this dilemma.
3. Do you think there was any other course available, other than what these men chose to do?
4. "The Nazis made Jews complicit in their own oppression." Discuss. (NB other examples of this are Jews being made to construct the walls of the ghetto, or Jews being made to buy tickets to the trains which took them to death camps.)