

Destruction, Departure and Deportation: The Zhitomir district under Nazi rule

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Operation Barbarossa, the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, was a disaster for the Nazis as well as for many of the people who lived in the Zhitomir area. It resulted in the destruction of the vast majority of the Jewish population and the removal of most ethnic Germans. The 28 months of occupation ended a strong German presence that had been in the area for eight decades and a Jewish presence that had been there for centuries.

It has been estimated that 900,000 to 1.6 million Ukrainian Jews were killed by the Nazis. These people were not sent to extermination camps such as the ones in Poland; instead, they were taken from their homes and shot in nearby forests. Secondary sweeps of cities rounded up the Jews missed during the initial purges. In villages, neighbours were quick to identify any Jews who had tried to hide.

It is further estimated that three to four million non-Jews died as a result of the occupation. Many causes have been cited, including disease and famine. There are mass graves adjacent to the former Stalag 358, just west of Zhitomir.

The invasion started on Sunday, June 22, 1941, and quickly moved through the predominately rural countryside before reaching Kiev (Kyiv), which Adolf Hitler had ordered destroyed. The Wehrmacht reached the German villages northwest of Zhitomir by early July, and took Zhitomir itself a few weeks later.

In the short term, the colonists, known as Volksdeutsche, greeted the arrival of the German army with enthusiasm. The arrests and killings of Germans came to an end, although the Nazis were quick to deal with Germans who had collaborated with the Communists. Under Nazi rule, German colonists were allowed more freedom than they had seen under Soviet control. They could reopen their churches, and they were appointed to low-level positions of authority in the new administration.

On July 17, 1941, Hitler issued a decree that outlined the structure of the newly occupied territories. The civilian occupation regime was designated the Reichskommissariat Ukraine, and included six general districts known as generalbesirke. These generalbezirke were further subdivided into 114 kreisgebiete, the equivalent of counties. Within the kreisgebiete, mayors were appointed to handle the administration of towns and villages. In the German colonies, these mayors were male colonists.

The use of the German language, which had been banned by the Soviets, was encouraged. A plan to bring more German settlers to the region was launched. The Germans who were already there were promised the return of their land and property, which had been seized in

the collectivization of farms and other Soviet acts. The Volksdeutsche were encouraged to join the Wehrmacht, and many young men signed up.

Karl Stumpp was in charge of gathering information on the German colonies in the region. His team collected names, ages, marriage information and more, including the names of the people who had been taken away in the Soviet years. These village reports are in the archives in Zhitomir, but access is highly restricted. Microfilm copies of about 40 village reports are at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.

Stumpp has been celebrated by German from Russia researchers for the family information he collected, but his role in Volhynia needs to be kept in context. As his team members gathered information in villages, they were effectively double-checking to make sure all Jews had been removed.

Lutheran pastor Samuel Lemke, who had been imprisoned for two years in the early 1930s, was able to resume his service in Zhitomir. He compiled extensive records of births and marriages in his church. His work was a tremendous gift for researchers, because he brought his books with him when he joined the trek out of the Zhitomir area in November 1943.

The trek was necessary because the Red Army was pushing the Wehrmacht back. In the fall of 1943, people in the German colonies could hear the sound of artillery getting closer. On Nov. 10 and 11, 1943, they were ordered to leave for their own safety. Many were told that this would be a brief time away from their homes; in two weeks, they were told, the German army would drive the Soviet army back and they would be allowed to return.

That never happened. The colonists, who had left their homes with few possessions, never returned to the only homes that many of them had ever known.

The trek out was difficult, because they had to get to Germany or German-occupied areas in Poland. There, they completed immigration paperwork, which is available today as the Einwandererzentralstelle records, part of the Berlin Document Center collection.

Some people on the trek never made it. Some died, and others, who were in areas taken by the Soviets, were returned to the Zhitomir area, tried, and sent to prisons or labour camps in the far north. Years later, they were allowed to move to Kasachstan. Their descendants were allowed to move to Germany after the break-up of the Soviet Union. Records of the people who were sent north or east are in the Zhitomir archives, and an index is on the SGGEE website.

The Nazi occupation of the Zhitomir area was a crucial element in the history of the German settlements in the area. It is important to research the history of our ancestral areas. Genealogical charts alone don't tell the stories of your ancestors; for the proper context, you need to understand the local geography and history in the areas where they lived.

Family history research in that area remains difficult, because of a lack of records, restrictions on what is there, and a language barrier. But learning everything we can about conditions is a highly rewarding aspect of the research that we do.

Research links

<http://www.odessa3.org/search.html>

Odessa3 search page, to find people in the EWZ records

<https://www.sggee.org>

SGGEE website, for the KGB and repatriation lists as well as Lemke's registers

<https://invenio.bundesarchiv.de/invenio/login.xhtml>

Invenio, the Bundesarchiv digital platform, for selected EWZ information as well as files dealing with compensation paid in Germany to some Volhynians

<https://collections.arolsen-archives.org/en/search/>

Arolsen Archives has some records of Volhynian Germans, including EWZ references and compensation documents

<https://www.myheritage.com>

My Heritage, for records, family trees and DNA matches

<https://www.23andme.com/>

23andme, for DNA matches

<https://www.ancestry.com/> and <https://www.ancestry.ca/>

Ancestry, for records, family trees and DNA matches

<https://www.familytreedna.com/>

FamilytreeDNA, for DNA matches, including Y-DNA matches

<https://www.ushmm.org>

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, for Stumpp village reports. (Not online; access on location only)

Background links

[https://www.academia.edu/21430355/The Nazi Ethnographic Research of Georg Leibbrandt and Karl Stumpp in Ukraine and Its North American Legacy](https://www.academia.edu/21430355/The_Nazi_Ethnographic_Research_of_Georg_Leibbrandt_and_Karl_Stumpp_in_Ukraine_and_Its_North_American_Legacy)

The Nazi Ethnographic Research of Georg Leibbrandt and Karl Stumpp in Ukraine, and Its North American Legacy, by Eric J. Schmaltz and Samuel D. Sinner.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/1432991>

A New Ordering of Space and Race: Nazi Colonial Dreams in Zhytomyr, Ukraine, 1941-1943, by Wendy Lower, Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, USHMM.

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