

Aktion Erntefest

On November 3, 1943, the Nazis committed simultaneous acts of mass murder of approximately 43,000 Jewish men, women, and children in three remaining camps in the [Generalgouvernement](#) (large area in Poland) - [Trawniki](#), [Poniatowa](#), and [Majdanek](#). The code name for this operation was Erntefest ("Harvest Festival").

Why Kill So Many in One Day?

The Nazis were getting nervous and perhaps a little bit scared.

The image of the German invincibility had been shattered at the Battle of Stalingrad in January 1943. Jews had revolted in the [Warsaw Ghetto](#) in April 1943 and again in the [Treblinka death camp](#) in August 1943. But it seems that it was the Jewish [uprising in the Sobibor death camp](#) on October 14, 1943 that made [Heinrich Himmler](#) fear more such revolts; thus after the Sobibor revolt, Himmler ordered the killing of the remaining Jews in the Generalgouvernement.

The killing was to be conducted all on one day, with almost no forewarning, to prevent any possible resistance.

Himmler entrusted this task to Higher SS and Police Leader of the Generalgouvernement, [Friedrich Krüger](#), who in turn delegated it to the Higher SS and Police Leader of the Lublin district, [Jacob Sporrenberg](#).

Trawniki

Early in the morning of November 3, the Jews in the Trawniki labor camp were taken from their barracks. In small groups, they were led to the Trawniki training camp for SS auxiliaries. Dance music was played (loudspeakers had been set up to drown out the noise of the shooting and the cries of the dying).

After being forced to undress, their clothes were added to the growing heap of clothing and they were led to a pre-dug trench. The first groups were led through the trench and told to lay down. They were then shot. Later groups were forced to lay down upon the dead bodies of the previous groups. Then they too were shot.

- Total Killed: By late afternoon, when the killing was over, approximately 8,000 to 10,000 Jews had been murdered in Trawniki on this single day.
- Cremation: To cover up the evidence of this mass killing, the Nazis brought in 100 to 120 Jews from the Milejow camp. After they had

cremated all the corpses, taking approximately two to three weeks, these prisoners were also shot and their bodies cremated.

Poniatowa

In very late October, Jews from the Poniatowa camp were taken near the entrance gate of the camp and ordered to dig two trenches: 95 meters by 2 meters, with a depth of 1.5 meters in a zigzag pattern. Though the prisoners were told that these trenches were defense trenches, they were really the place where they were soon to be shot.

Very similar to what happened that very same day in Trawniki, Jews were taken to the trenches and shot.

"We undressed quickly and, our arms uplifted, we went in the direction of the ditches we had dug ourselves. The graves which were two metres deep were full of naked bodies. My neighbour from the hut with her fourteen-year-old, fair-haired and innocent-looking daughter seemed to be looking for a comfortable place. While they were approaching the place an SS man charged his rifle and told them: 'Don't hurry.' Nevertheless we lay down quickly, in order to avoid looking at the dead. My little daughter was quaking with fear, and asking me to cover her eyes. I embraced her head; my left hand I put on her eyes while in my right I held her hands. In this way we lay down, our faces turned downwards.

*Shots were fired; I felt a sharp pain in my hand, and the bullet pierced the skull of my daughter. Another shot was heard very close nearby. I was utterly shaken, turned giddy and lost consciousness. I heard the moaning of a woman nearby, but it came to an end after a few seconds." **

- Resistance: Unlike the other two camps, in Poniatowa, a group of Jewish prisoners resisted. When the shooting was nearing completion, a group belonging to the Underground broke away. After setting fire to several of the barracks containing clothing, the resisters found safety, though only temporarily, in a barrack. With a few weapons they had managed to acquire in the preceding months, they fired back at the Nazis. Unfortunately, the Nazis set fire to the barrack and all the resisters were burned alive.
- Total Killed: In Poniatowa, approximately 15,000 Jews were murdered in this one day.
- Cremation: The Nazis kept approximately 150 Jews alive in Poniatowa so that these prisoners would cremate the corpses. The Nazis also gathered approximately 50 more Jews, whom they found hiding throughout the camp. Yet these prisoners refused to cremate the bodies. Thus, these prisoners were shot and replaced with 120 other Jews from another camp.

* Female survivor of the Poniatowa mass executions as quoted in Martin Gilbert, *The Holocaust* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1985) 629

Majdanek

Late in October, about 300 prisoners from Majdanek were taken out behind Compounds V and VI, near the crematorium, and told to dig. They were to dig three trenches, approximately 100 meters long and 2 meters deep, in a zigzag line.

For the killing, about 100 SS men and police came from Auschwitz and elsewhere to supplement the staff at Majdanek. Two trucks with loudspeakers entered the camp in preparation for November 3 - one was placed near the camp gate (near the road) and the other was placed near the newly dug trenches.

On the morning of November 3, the prisoners went through the routine process of roll call. At the end of roll call, the Jewish prisoners from Compounds III and IV were ordered to step forward and to create a separate column. These and thousands of other Jews from nearby camps, factories, and labor squads were taken to Compound V to await execution.

In groups of 100 (men and women separately), the Jewish prisoners were taken to the lavatories and forced to undress. They were then taken, naked, through a hole in the fence of Compound V (hole cut by Schutzlagerführer Thumann). From the hole in the fence, the prisoners passed through a corridor bordered by armed policemen. Once at the ditches, they were forced to lay down and then shot by SS-men standing on the edge of the trench. Following groups were made to lay on top of the newly dead of the earlier groups.

- Total Killed: In Majdanek on November 3, approximately 18,000 Jews were murdered. This day was known as "bloody Wednesday" among the remaining Majdanek prisoners.
- Cremation: The Nazis kept 311 Jewish women and 300 Jewish men alive to sort the clothing and other possessions of those just murdered. After the sorting was done, the women were sent to Auschwitz and gassed on arrival. The women were forced to cremate corpses, and then they too were killed.

End of Aktion Reinhard

The mass murder of approximately 43,000 Jews on November 3, 1943 during Aktion Erntefest signified the end of [Aktion Reinhard](#). This was a very bloody day in history.

Bibliography

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