

A Brief History of Jews in Finland

Finland formed a part of the Swedish empire from the Middle Ages until 1809, when it was annexed by the Russian Empire and constituted a grand duchy. During the period of Swedish rule, Jews had not been permitted to settle in the country. The first Jews to do so were soldiers in the Russian army, who were permitted to stay after completing their military service, in accordance with a statute issued by Emperor Alexander II in 1858. By the beginning of the 20th century there were approximately one thousand Jews living in Finland.

In 1918, one year after the collapse of the Russian empire and after Finland had declared her independence, Jews in Finland were granted civil rights. Earlier attempts to achieve this goal were defeated either by domestic opposition or by the Russian government.

Today, the size of the Finnish Jewish community is about 1,500, mostly concentrated around the capital, Helsinki. They have a synagogue, a Jewish school, and a lively social scene.

Finland aligned itself with Nazi Germany to regain territory it had lost to the Soviet Union. In keeping with this localized perspective, the primary war for Finland from 1941-1944 was the Continuation War, not the larger conflict that became known as World War II. Nevertheless Finland did ally itself with the Nazi regime, which was responsible for some of the most horrific crimes known to mankind.

Does this new dimension complicate our ability to make clear judgements about history?

How does that fact that some Finnish Jews served in the Finnish army, which was fighting alongside the Nazi army, add to the complex picture of the period?

Thanks To Scandinavia educates about efforts to save Jews during World War II. Our goal is to make sure the truth is heard and never forgotten. Every year, dozens of Scandinavian educators and students are awarded grants that enable them to study in the United States, Israel, and Europe.

Such is the message of courage and humanity that our generation and every generation to come should hold dear to their hearts.

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Finnish Jewish Archives/National Archives of Finland.



Sissi Seleste (second from left) worked in the entertainment squads of the Finnish army. The swastika had been adopted by the Finnish air force in 1918.

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Finland's Story



Finnish Jewish Archives/National Archives of Finland.

Memorial Day at the Jewish Cemetery in Helsinki

Even though Finland had a military alliance with Germany, the Finns succeeded in protecting their Jewish compatriots.

1933
1945

Between January 30, 1933, when Adolf Hitler became chancellor of Germany, and May 8, 1945, when Germany surrendered and the war in Europe came to a close, European Jewry was virtually annihilated. Six million Jewish men, women, and children were murdered, and some three million more were uprooted from their homes.

Soon after Hitler took power in Germany, all Jewish businesses were boycotted, Jews were forbidden to practice law, fired from civil service jobs, and forced to leave school. The Germans expanded eastward, taking over Austria, Czechoslovakia and Poland. This placed the great population centers of European Jewry within the Nazi grasp. Ultimately, the Nazis implemented a cruelly efficient program of systematized mass murder.

At the time, Jews in the Nordic countries received uncommon levels of support and protection. What happened to the Jews of Finland is one of the most extraordinary chapters in that story.

Finland protects its Jews

Finland, which gained independence in 1917, was a neighbor of the Soviet Union. Relations between democratic Finland and the Soviet dictatorship were uneasy throughout the interwar period. In 1939, the Soviet Union attacked Finland hoping to annex her into the Soviet empire, as outlined in the Nazi-Soviet pact. The ensuing Winter War lasted from November 1939 through March 1940. Although Finland managed to prevent the Soviets from taking over the country, the Finns had to concede large tracts of territory. Around 400,000 Finns living in the annexed region were settled elsewhere in the country.

The possibility of rectifying the situation arose when Germany made overtures to Finland in 1940 in preparation for her assault upon the Soviet Union. Finland agreed to join the coming German offensive in order to win back the lost territories. Finnish forces advanced into the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941, initiating what is known in Finland as the Continuation War of 1941–44.

During the course of the war the Finnish army captured Soviet soldiers, some of whom were Jewish. Finland also had its own Jewish community numbering about 2,000, most of them citizens. In addition, there were a few hundred Jewish refugees living in Finland, mainly from the Central European states occupied by Germany. What happened to these disparate groups of Jews during this period?

The Fate of Finnish Jews

Like all other able-bodied males, Finnish Jews were subject to conscription. Some 200 Jewish men served in the Finnish armed forces and several dozen Jewish women served in the voluntary auxiliary organization for women, Lotta

Svärd. Ironically, Jews in the ranks of the Finnish army were fighting on the same side as Nazi Germany. But it was not generally viewed that way in Finland, where the conflict tended to be perceived as one between Finland and the Soviet Union only. The Jews in the service of Finland saw themselves as fighting for their homeland, not for Hitler.

Complicating matters further, were Nazi plans for extermination of the Jews. At the Wannsee conference in January 1942, a planning meeting for the Holocaust, it was agreed that the small Nordic Jewish communities would be left alone temporarily. Thus Germany never made an official request to the Finnish government to hand over its Jews. Neither did the Finnish legislature pass any discriminatory legislation affecting the status of Jewish Finns.

SS head Heinrich Himmler, who was in charge of the practical arrangements for disposing of the Jews, apparently put out informal feelers to the political leadership of Finland, sounding out Finnish willingness to join in the Final Solution. In the summer of 1942, Prime Minister Johan Rangell rebuffed the overtures, saying, "There is no Jewish question in Finland."

The Fate of Jewish Refugees in Finland

The few hundred refugees in Finland from countries that fell to the Nazis were foreigners, and therefore Finnish authorities considered them a liability. And since anti-Semitism was not unknown in Finland, their Jewishness made them doubly suspect. The Finnish security police, which had considerable authority over the treatment of foreigners at the time, believed that Jews and ethnic Russians were likely to be communists.

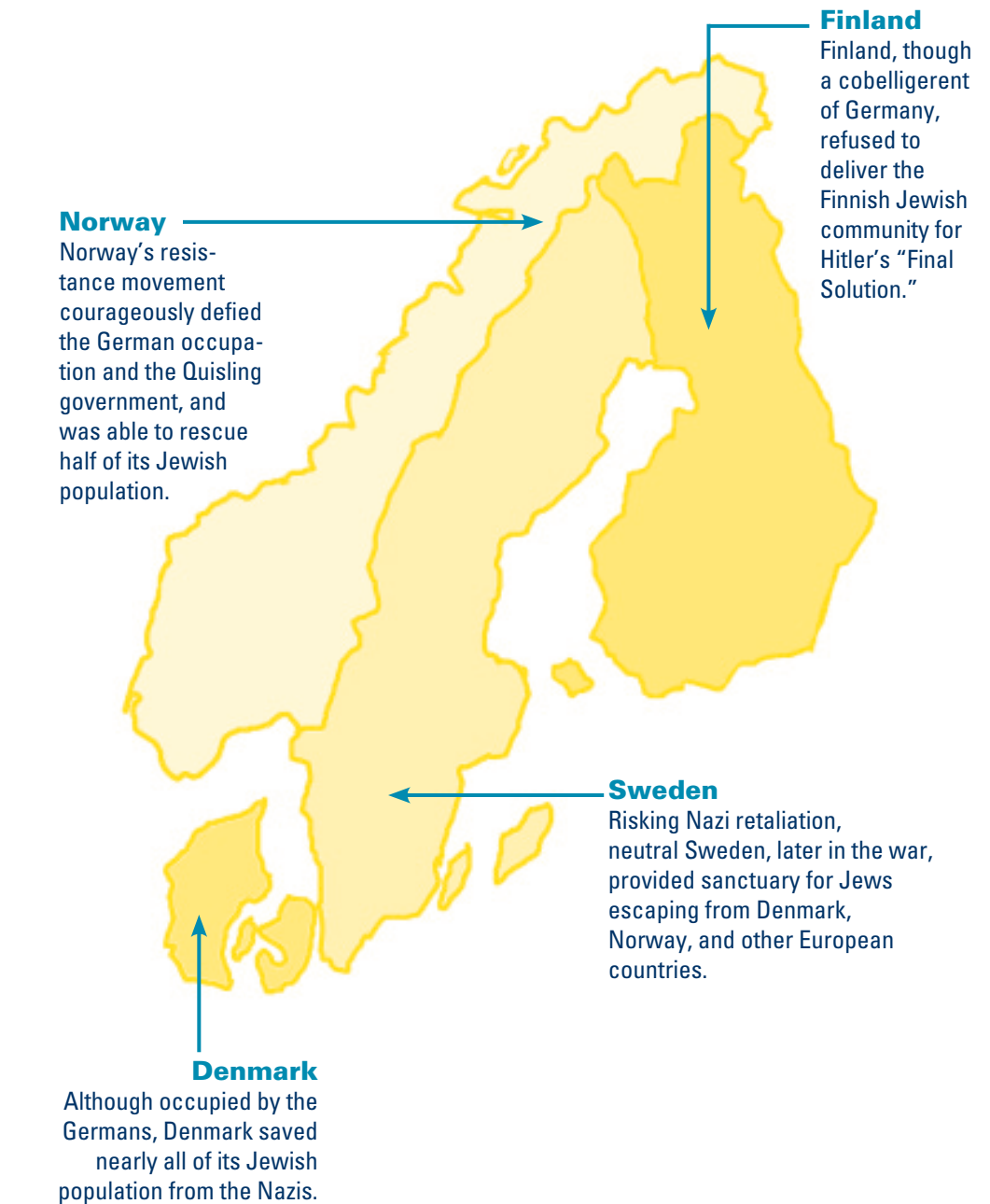
Upon the outbreak of war against the Soviet Union in 1941, Jewish refugees in Finland were interned, meaning that they were sent to country parishes away from the capital. Some of the males were also conscripted for labor, working to build roads and fortifications. The security police deported a total of 12 Jews, as unwanted aliens, into German-controlled areas, and most were eventually deported to Auschwitz and killed. A public outcry, noted in both the Swedish and Finnish press in late 1942, seems to have ended these deportations of individual Jews.

Nevertheless, the security police saw the Jewish refugees as useless mouths to feed as well as security risks, and pressed for their removal from Finland. By late 1942 a plan was drawn up to send the foreign Jews to Sweden, which, in 1944, did receive a few hundred of them. As a group, then, the foreign Jews residing in Finland were not made victims of the Holocaust, even though some authorities clearly took the view that they should be ejected from the country.

The Fate of Jewish Prisoners of War

During the course of the Continuation War, Finland took some 70,000 Soviet prisoners of war, among them over 700 Jews. Prisoners experienced severe conditions in Finnish prisoner-of-war camps, where the death rate climbed to over 30 percent during the winter of 1941 through summer of 1942, due to malnutrition and disease.

The Finnish military authorities adopted the German method of separating prisoners according to nationality, of which Jews were one. This arrangement was thought to ease the management of large groups of prisoners



and facilitate their use as labor. The Jewish community of Finland helped Jewish prisoners-of-war by sending them food and clothing. This reduced the death rate among Jewish prisoners to under 20 percent. While high, it was markedly lower than among the ethnic Russians.

Finnish military authorities also delivered over 500 Soviet prisoners of war into the hands of the German security police operating in Northern Norway and Northern Finland, which was an agreed-upon German theatre of war.

The Finns suspected them of being active communists. Their most likely fate in German hands was execution. Among this group were 47 persons identified as Jews.

Despite the pressures of the war and the alliance with Nazi Germany, Finland remained a democracy, and important sectors of civic society continued to function. This explains why, despite the actions of the security police and the military authorities, Finland never fully participated in the Nazi Holocaust project.