

2.1. The Bureaucracy of Deportation

The Nazis moved hundreds of thousands of people in their targeted populations around Central Europe during the Holocaust, mostly by train. This brief reading describes how this was accomplished.

Source: Auschwitz: Inside the Nazi State Project

When Hitler and the Nazis decided to solve the “Jewish Problem” first by deporting Jews and then by exterminating them, an enormous bureaucratic structure was responsible for moving Jews from their homes throughout Europe ultimately to the extermination camps in Poland. It operated with frightening efficiency.

From 1940 through late 1944, Nazi authorities transported millions of people across occupied Europe—from points as distant as Greece and Italy, France and Norway, Hungary and the Soviet Union. To accomplish this, the Nazis marshaled together several German government ministries, agencies in its allied and occupied countries, and the web of railways that tied Europe together.

In the German government, the Central Office for Reich Security managed the deportation process; the Transportation Ministry coordinated train schedules; and the Foreign Office worked with the governments of other nations. The Gestapo and military authorities located and rounded up the deportees in their home countries.

For deportees, the trip was miserable. Herded into freight cars, they had little room to move, no seating, and no sanitary facilities. They could be in the train for days with little or no food or water. Their first stop was likely at one of hundreds of transit camps established throughout the Nazi empire. These were holding camps where deportees were kept, sometimes forced to work for German industry, until they were moved onto the next stop, which could be another transit camp, a work camp, or a death camp.