

Video Clip: WWII in the Middle East

The Forgotten Part of WWII

The Holocaust was a genocide that occurred in tandem with WWII. Although the Middle East and North Africa were not subject to the mass internment and murders of the genocide there were Jewish communities throughout that were greatly and directly affected by the Nazi regime and WWII.

Suggested Implementations

Holidays

1. Yom HaShoah
2. Holocaust Remembrance Day

History

1. WWII and the Holocaust
2. The Farhoud

Background

By the end of 1940, the Mediterranean Sea was closed to normal ship traffic. The British were involved in fighting campaigns from Libya to Iran. Britain moved one million men to the Middle East from as far away as Australia.

Meanwhile, a string of other occurrences meant the Middle East was becoming involved in the war:

- In February 1941, Jerusalem Mufti's private secretary went to Germany to meet with Secretary of State Ernst von Weizsacker and Fritz Grobba who left Iraq and became Middle East expert in the Foreign Office.
- The British white papers prevented Jewish immigration to Palestine. The day after the declaration of war, which became World War II, the British fired at Tiger Hill, a ship with illegal Jewish immigrants, off a beach near Tel Aviv.
- The Vichy administration allowed German planes with arms to land in Syria. They also allowed Germany to use the Tunisian port at Bizerte to bring military supplies to North Africa and establish a submarine base in Dakar.
- Jewish requests for organized units to fight the Nazis in Iraq and other communities were continually put on hold, lest a Jewish military force provoke states whose support and oil the British needed.
- Camps for German prisoners of war were set up at Camp Mardi in Gaza.

In the 1940s about 135,000 Jews lived in Iraq, with about 90,000 in Baghdad, 10,000 in Basra, and the remainder scattered throughout many small towns and villages. On June 1&2, 1941, the Jewish community of Baghdad was under attack in what became known as the Farhoud, or breakdown of civil order. This was on Shavuoth, the time Jews would visit the tombs of Prophet Ezekiel, Ezra the Scribe and

Joshua the High Priest. Mobs of youth gangs and retreating soldiers, followed by Bedouin tribesman and local rabble, attacked Jews and perpetrated the worst atrocities of murder, rape, and mutilation that the Jewish community of Iraq had ever experienced.

2,000 families were affected, between 135-189 Jews were killed, 700-1,000 wounded, and at least 10 were raped. Damage and looting of 550 stores and 900 apartments took place over those 48 hours. The government appointed an investigating committee who placed the blame for the Farhoud on the intensive Nazi propaganda during the 1930s and the work of the Mufti of Jerusalem.

Once the Iranian railroad was built, most Iraqi Jews moved to Tehran, some becoming quite wealthy. Europeans fled to there as well and by November 1942, approximately 26,000 Polish refugees, 1,800 of which were Jews, joined the Iraqi refugees in Tehran. Soon a separate tent city was set up outside Tehran for the child refugees, for many Poles and Russians sent their children to keep them safe if they couldn't get out themselves. By the end of October 1943, there were 807 children in the camp who became known as the "Tehran Children." The local Jewish community brought them food and clothing. In January 1943, 716 of the children were then taken to Karachi, Pakistan, then on to Aden, and up the Red Sea to the Suez Canal to attempt to enter Palestine. The second group went in August through Iraq. In Palestine, the children were settled in Jewish communal settlements. After the war, a fortunate few were reunited with their parents who survived in Europe.

Meanwhile, thousands of Jews arrived from Europe to Egypt. And until Mussolini entered the war, Turkey was the logical escape route to Palestine for Jews fleeing Central Europe and the Balkans. There was a well-established ancient community in Turkey. However, Turkey remained neutral throughout the war. Or in other words, they tried to keep both sides happy. To do that they could not show a preference for Jews. Turkey had been hit hard by WWI and was trying to get itself out of its financial troubles. They instituted a wealth tax called *Valik Vergisi* which effectively wiped out much of the Turkish Jewish economy with up to 179% taxes for Jews. Failure to pay the tax within a month led to deportation to a forced labor camp. Despite the Jewish community having been established for at least a millennium in Turkey, their loyalty was suddenly called into question.

Ships sailing from Trieste or Venice, en-route to Shanghai stopped at Port Said, where women from Cairo, Alexandria and Port Said met the ships and provided financial support and medical care and had the dead buried. They even helped those who wanted to go to Palestine stay in Egypt and wait for a way to go to Palestine.

Questions for Discussion

1. The Israeli government officially commemorates the Farhoud every year in June. Should that be a separate commemoration from Yom HaShoah?
2. Although the Middle East was not part of the Final Solution, what were some of the significant effects on the ancient Jewish communities in the region?

Suggested Readings

Simon, Reeva Spector. *The Jews of the Middle East and North Africa: The Impact of World War II*. Routledge, 2019.

For some personal accounts of the Farhoud in the context of Jewish heritage see:

Edwin Shuker <https://youtu.be/BGR3SNdcbxI>

Richard Sassoon https://youtu.be/IGlgRRnDR_Q

David Dangoor <https://youtu.be/w0ZbRa6D4ZA>

<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-farhud>