

INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM

GHETTOS IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE: NEW SPATIAL AND SOCIAL PERSPECTIVES

October 1-2, 2026

Mémorial de la Shoah, Paris



Leibniz Institute
for Contemporary History

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CALL FOR PAPERS

"When we talk about the Shoah", wrote Dieter Pohl, "the word 'ghetto' is among the key terms" [Pohl in Zarusky, 2010]. Yet ghettos have received far less attention from researchers than killing centres and concentrationary systems. Despite some advances in historiography, this observation remains valid today. The first obstacle to an in-depth analysis of the ghetto seems to lie in its very definition. What is a ghetto? What distinguishes it from other spatial structures of confinement? Through the papers that will be offered, this symposium aims to historicize and clarify what the term 'ghetto' encompasses, or at least to establish a typology of these spaces.

According to the USHMM's *Encyclopaedia of Camps and Ghettos*, more than 1,150 ghettos were established under Nazi occupation, from Poland to Soviet territories, and from the Baltic States to southern Russia. These ghettos took a variety of forms - open, closed, and semi-open - and were established in a range of spaces, including neighbourhoods, kolkhoz buildings, pigsties, factories, schools, barns, and more. Ghettoised areas existed for varying periods, ranging from a few weeks to several years. These temporal disparities were often linked to the functions they were intended to serve in the eyes of Nazi leaders. The many differences between ghettoised areas highlight the decentralised nature of anti-Jewish policy [Browning, 2007]. Despite indisputable similarities, each ghetto remained unique in terms of its location, its history and the geography of the area [Cole, 2016]. The "small" ghettos in the East have been less extensively studied than the large ghettos established in the General Government or the Warthegau. In 2009,

Dan Michman attributed this discrepancy to the origins of the authors, most of whom were Jewish historians from Poland or Lithuania. According to Michman, this focus has contributed to the development of "a Polish model" [Heymann in Jablonka, Wieviorka, 2013] that continues to dominate studies of the Shoah [Miron, Shulhany, 2009]. Apart from the question of the researchers' origins, it should be emphasised that the focus on the "large" areas of ghettoization in Poland is partly explained by the availability of documentation. The density and richness of sources available on the ghettos of Warsaw or Łódź, for example, are not necessarily matched by those concerning "smaller" ghettos established in the territories of the former Soviet Union. While the ghettos formed in Central and Eastern Europe have been identified by researchers and their histories are broadly reconstructed in major encyclopaedias published by the USHMM and Yad Vashem, much remains to be discovered about these very particular spaces. The symposium will focus on a wide range of regions, including Poland, Belarus, Ukraine, the Baltic States, and Russia. Particular attention, however, will be given to the specificities of "small" ghettos established in territories that remain under-studied in historiography, such as the Ukrainian Reichskommissariat or the military-administered zone of Belarus. The symposium warmly welcomes studies that adopt cross-disciplinary and comparative approaches. While case studies of individual ghettos exist, few works attempt to examine ghettoization as a whole, exploring its underlying logic, its unique features, and its recurring patterns. By bringing together international researchers from diverse disciplinary backgrounds, this conference aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the policy of

ghettoization and, more broadly, of the destruction of European Jewry.

Over the past ten years or so, the historiography of the ghettos has been revitalised by new research tools and methods [Knowles, Cole, Giordano, 2014]. Analysis of contemporary documents (administrative sources, diaries, correspondence) reveals that these spaces were porous, with constant interaction with the outside world - both officially (forced labour, work permits) and unofficially (bartering, escapes). Current research is allowing us to approach - but not fully grasp - the reality of the ghettos: the identities of their inmates, daily life within them [Hájková, 2020; Löw, 2024], types of forced labour (German companies, Organisation Todt, farms, army workshops), spatial transformations, and population movements. The ghettos stood at the heart of the war of annihilation and Nazi colonisation in the East, caught between the economic exploitation of Jewish labour and the policy of genocide. The aim of the conference is to revisit fundamental aspects of the history of the ghettos in light of recent historiographical advances.

The two-day event will be structured into four half-day sessions, each dedicated to a theme linked by the common thread of space and spatiality. The first focus will be on the place of ghettos within the geography of the Shoah. We will examine the functionality of the ghettos in relation to the other methods used to enslave and exterminate populations, as well as the characteristics of the spaces in which the ghettos were established. The second focus will explore how the ghettos were integrated into the physical geography of the city or, more broadly, the region (use of existing structures, repurposing of spaces, and natural boundaries such as rivers, lakes, etc.). While the first two sections will

examine the ghettos' relationship with the outside world, the next two will focus on their internal spatiality and social structure. The third will explore the creation or re-creation of sociable spaces based on age, gender, political affiliation, economic status, or other criteria. The fourth will examine the relationship between intimate space (the body) and the space of the ghetto.

INFORMATION

Languages

Symposium languages: English and French

Calendar

➔ **October 1st, 2025: Submission of proposals:** proposals should include a 500-word summary and a short biographical note. They should be sent to the following e-mail address:

symposiumghettos2026@gmail.com

➔ **End of November 2025: Notification of acceptance**

Organisation Committee

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