

Video Clip: WWII in the Middle East

The Forgotten Part of WWII

<https://youtu.be/zHbVMhgu958>

While the Holocaust is primarily remembered as a European tragedy, Jewish communities across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) experienced significant upheaval during World War II. This lesson explores how the rise of Nazism, shifting colonial powers, and the war effort affected long-established Jewish communities from Iraq to Iran, Egypt to Turkey. Through primary sources, personal testimonies, and teacher-guided discussion, students will consider how a global conflict reshaped Jewish life far from the European front.

Topics for Integration

1. WWII in the Middle East
2. Holocaust Studies (International Holocaust Remembrance Day and Yom HaShoah)
3. Jewish Life in Arab Lands
4. British and Vichy Imperialism
5. Nazi Propaganda in the Arab World
6. The Farhoud Pogrom in Baghdad (1941)
7. Refugee Movements and the Tehran Children
8. Jewish-Muslim Relations Before and After WWII

Background

By 1940, WWII had expanded into the Middle East. The British moved over one million troops into the region, while the Mediterranean was closed to civilian shipping. Meanwhile, the region's Jewish communities—some of which dated back over 2,000 years—found themselves caught in the crossfire of European fascism, local nationalism, and colonial maneuvering.

Nazi propaganda was actively disseminated across the Arab world. The Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, Haj Amin al-Husseini, played a central role in collaborating with Axis leaders. His emissaries met with German officials to strategize around shared anti-Zionist interests. Germany also established a media and radio presence, blaming Jews for European and Arab misfortunes alike.

The 1939 British White Paper restricted Jewish immigration to Palestine, closing off a vital escape route from Europe. Meanwhile, British interests in Arab oil and wartime alliances meant avoiding open support for Jewish defense units or resettlement plans, leaving vulnerable communities exposed.

The Farhoud (“violent dispossession”) erupted during Shavuot of 1941 in Baghdad. After a pro-Nazi government was defeated, retreating troops, nationalist youth, and local mobs unleashed violence on the city’s Jewish community. Over two days: 135–189 Jews were killed, 700–1,000 injured, dozens raped, and over 1,400 homes and businesses looted. Although the Iraqi government blamed Nazi propaganda and incitement by the Mufti, it offered little restitution or justice.

As war spread, over 26,000 Polish refugees arrived in Iran, including 1,800 Jews. Among them were nearly 1,000 orphaned Jewish children who became known as the “Tehran Children.” Aid from local Jewish communities and Zionist organizations helped relocate many to Palestine via Karachi, Aden, and Suez. Their journey was one of resilience and rescue, marking a rare success story amid the chaos of WWII.

Turkey, while seemingly neutral, imposed the Valik Vergisi—a discriminatory wealth tax that devastated its Jewish population. Those unable to pay were deported to forced labor camps.

In Egypt, Jewish communities helped European Jewish refugees en route to Palestine, offering shelter, medical aid, and burial services at ports like Port Said. The ripples of World War II were felt throughout the region.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why do you think the story of Middle Eastern Jews during WWII is often excluded from mainstream Holocaust narratives?
2. How did the British policies in Palestine and alliances in the Middle East influence Jewish vulnerability during WWII?
3. Should the Farhoud be commemorated as a separate event from Yom HaShoah? Why or why not?
4. What impact did Nazi propaganda have on Jewish-Muslim relations in Iraq and other Arab lands?
5. How does the story of the Tehran Children highlight both the dangers and resilience of Jewish life during the war?

Suggested Readings

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

Black, Edwin. *The Farhud: Roots of the Arab-Nazi Alliance in the Holocaust*. Dialogue Press, 2010. "The Farhud", USHMM Encyclopedia.

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

Gorenberg, Gershom. *War of Shadows: codebreakers, spies, and the secret struggle to drive the Nazis from the Middle East*. PublicAffairs, 2021.

Online Lectures

<https://www.youtube.com/live/TRJyOlzKEK8?si=2eiCtjVqCqOu1hbN> with Professor Reeva Spector Simon

https://www.youtube.com/live/tbiq_mawgk?si=ilUckgBclvTsXRLM with Gershom Gorenberg

Primary Sources: Testimonies

- Edwin Shuker: <https://youtu.be/BGR3SNdcxbl>
- Richard Sassoon: https://youtu.be/IGlgRRnDR_Q
- Naim Dallal <https://sephardivoices.com/naim-dallal-iraq/> starting at 1:47 on interview transcript
- Sami Sourani <https://sephardivoices.com/sami-sourani-iraq/> starting at 22:41 in interview transcript
- USHMM Farhud Article: <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-farhud>