Chełm's Unraveling: The Holocaust and Interethnic Violence in Nazi-Occupied Poland

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After breaking out of the Sobibor death camp during the October 1943 uprising, 37-year-old Kalmen Wewryk fled to his nearby hometown of Chełm, where he had lived with his family until they were deported to the killing center in May 1942. On the run from Nazi hunters, the former carpenter and merchant turned to Christian friends and acquaintances for help. For reasons that confounded the Sobibor escapee, however, ordinary people now acted cruelly to strangers and neighbors alike. Under the crucible of German occupation, otherwise unassuming people were turned "into egotistical and suspicious animals."[1] Through months of knocking on doors, Wewryk was refused shelter on countless occasions but sometimes was lucky enough to receive a handful of food when not chased away with pitchforks or threatened with denunciation to the Gestapo. This was even done by people he had liked and trusted before the war. One peasant woman, whom Wewryk remembered for her warmth and generosity, suddenly became hysterical when he came begging for food, calling him the devil and shoving him out of her house. "I couldn't understand it," Wewryk recalled. Rejected and betrayed by the rural population, his only hope for survival was to join a group of Jewish partisans.[2]

Wewryk's memoir, like the accounts of so many Jewish survivors, highlights the impact of local Christians on the fates of persecuted Jews in the Polish lands.[3] Through widespread denunciations, refusal of assistance, and active participation in "Jew hunts," Polish and Ukrainian villagers ensured that the annihilation of Chełm's Jewish population was effectively total. Recent works by scholars affiliated with the Polish Center for Holocaust Research, including a 2018 two-volume study of nine counties in the General Government, have demonstrated the pervasive nature of such activities in occupied Poland.[4] While some 7,000 Polish citizens have been honored by Yad Vashem as Righteous Among the Nations for saving Jews, it has become

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1. Kalmen Wewryk, *To Sobibor and Back: An Eyewitness Account* (Włodawa, 2008), 127.

2. Wewryk, *To Sobibor and Back*, 119.

3. "Christian" here refers to Polish and Ukrainian ethnicity more than religious devotion.

4. Barbara Engelking and Jan Grabowski, eds., *Dalej jest noc: Losy Żydów w wybranych powiatach okupowanej Polski*, 2 vols. (Warsaw, 2018), translated as *Night Without End: The Fate of Jews in German-Occupied Poland* (Bloomington, 2022); Barbara Engelking, *"Jest*

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increasingly clear how exceptional these individuals were, particularly given the hostility some faced from their own community. Altogether, the non-Jewish population is believed to have played a significant role in the death of up to 200,000 Polish Jews who died on the run between 1942 and 1945.[5]

In the existing literature, the disturbing behavior of non-Jewish Poles during the war is largely viewed as an expression of deeply rooted anti-Jewish animosity, even as it overlapped with other motives.[6] Certainly, one cannot explain Polish behavior towards Jewish fugitives without the influence of persistent antisemitism, which facilitated anti-Jewish violence by normalizing the social and cultural exclusion of Jews from Polish (Catholic) society.[7] However, Wewryk's surprise at specific neighbors' conduct underscores the wider breakdown of Chełm's multiethnic society. Prior experiences with prejudice did not prepare Wewryk and other Jews for the depravity of wartime events and the extent of local participation in the genocide. In this regard, the confusion many Holocaust survivors experienced calls for explication of the social processes and conditions whereby Chełm's residents turned to violence and cruelty.

This article explores the emergence of popular violence in Poland through a microhistory of the Chełm region. Localized studies alone cannot capture the full scale of genocide, but micro-perspectives can illuminate complexities on the ground often overlooked in macrohistories, particularly during episodes of "communal genocide," as Omer Bartov has named the close, intimate killing between former neighbors.[8] Such cases frequently belie the classic triad in Genocide Studies of "perpetrators, victims, and bystanders" as categories too rigid to convey the public and participatory nature of intercommunal slaughter.[9] Indeed, whereas the scholarship on genocide is replete with political histories, studies of intercommunal conflict in eastern Europe, the Balkans, and Rwanda have demonstrated the importance of going beyond state actors and ideological motivations for explaining collective violence. These works have highlighted new dynamics, such as how individual behaviors and neighborly relations evolve during times of crisis, while chronologically mapping

taki piękny słoneczny dzień. . .": Losy Żydów szukających ratunku na wsi polskiej 1942–1945 (Warsaw, 2011); Jan Grabowski, *Hunt for the Jews: Betrayal and Murder in German-Occupied Poland* (Bloomington, 2013); Jan Tomasz Gross and Irena Grudzińska-Gross, *Golden Harvest: Events at the Periphery of the Holocaust* (Oxford, 2012).

5. Grabowski, *Hunt for the Jews*, 172.

6. Jan Błoński, "The Poor Poles look at the Ghetto," in Antony Polonsky, ed., *My Brother's Keeper: Recent Polish Debates on the Holocaust* (London, 1990), 34–52; Jan Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton, 2001); Joanna Michlic, *Poland's Threatening Other: The Image of the Jew from 1880 to the Present* (Lincoln, 2008).

7. Alina Cała, *Jew. The Eternal Enemy? The History of Antisemitism in Poland*, trans. Mikołaj Golubiewski (New York, 2018).

8. Omer Bartov, "Eastern Europe as the Site of Genocide," *Journal of Modern History* 80, no. 3 (2008): 557–93.

9. Jan Burzlaff, "Confronting the Communal Grave: A Reassessment of Social Relations during the Holocaust in Eastern Europe," *The Historical Journal* 63, no. 4 (September 2020), 1054–77.

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the spread of interethnic attacks underscores their emergent—rather than inevitable—character.[10]

The need for a close examination of Chełm is particularly acute because of the dizzying array of violence that occurred there during World War II. Under the Third Reich, Chełm was transformed into a center for Nazi extermination and population policies, standing at the junction of organized terror against Poles and Ukrainians, demographic engineering under General Plan East, the extermination of Jews within the Final Solution, and the mass murder of Soviet POWs. It was during this onslaught that Chełm devolved into a macabre scene of nationalist and popular violence. Jews were subjected to extensive betrayals; Poles and Ukrainians engaged in mutual killings; Red Army fugitives were often denounced or otherwise captured; and rural residents experienced a wave of robberies from armed partisans and bandit-type groups alike.

Treating this outbreak as a whole, I argue that anti-Jewish violence was embedded in a vicious transformation under Nazi occupation, a multifaceted process that also engendered an array of attacks against Poles, Ukrainians, and escaped Soviet POWs. Examining only one layer of this locally propelled violence can unduly privilege cultural or ideological explanations and neglect a greater inclination among the population to use violence more generally. Due to space constraints, not every type of violence can be explored equally in the present article, but by highlighting some of the shared mechanisms and underlying factors, I aim to situate local complicity during the Holocaust within the broader collapse of social relations during WWII.[11] My intention is not to compare or relativize the different crimes that took place, but to investigate their parallel emergence for a more holistic understanding of such events.

Interweaving the fates of multiple groups, this article stands out from the larger scholarship on occupied Poland, which tends to study different strands of violence apart (the subjugation of Poles, starvation of Soviet POWs, genocide of Jews). There are notable exceptions to this insular trend, including two "collective autobiographies" of borderland communities upended by twentieth-century violence,[12] but the broader historiography on wartime Poland remains rather restrictive.[13] Such monochromatic approaches contrast greatly

10. Lee Ann Fuji, *Killing Neighbors: Webs of Violence in Rwanda* (Ithaca, 2011); Stathis Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge, Eng., 2006); Jeffrey Kopstein and Jason Wittenberg, *Intimate Violence: Anti-Jewish Pogroms on the Eve of the Holocaust* (Ithaca, 2018); Max Bergholz, *Violence as a Generative Force: Identity, Nationalism, and Memory in a Balkan Community* (Ithaca, 2017).

11. Marcin Zaremba, *Wielka trwoga: Polska 1944–1947: Ludowa reakcja na kryzys* (Kraków, 2012); Anna Wylegała, "Krajobraz po wojnie: Anatomia rozpadu świata społecznego na przykładzie Polski w okresie II wojny światowej," *Studia Socjologiczne* 3 (2016): 133–63.

12. Tarik Cyril Amar, *The Paradox of Ukrainian Lviv: A Borderland City between Stalinists, Nazis, and Nationalists* (Ithaca, 2015); Omer Bartov, *Anatomy of a Genocide: The Life and Death of a Town Called Buczacz* (New York, 2018).

13. Jochen Böhler and Jacek Andrzej Młynarczyk, "Collaboration and Resistance in Wartime Poland (1939–1945): A Case for Differentiated Occupation Studies," *Journal of Modern European History* 16, no. 2 (2018): 225–46; Daniel Blatman, "Beyond National Identities: New Challenges in Writing the History of the Holocaust in Poland and Israel,"

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with the comparative perspectives that have emerged within the wider scholarship of mass violence, including the spatial turn in histories of the European "Bloodlands" and the growing push by genocide scholars to analyze multiple perpetrator and victim groups.[14]

For Chełm, a multilayered perspective is essential to reconstruct the wider arc of ethnic relations. On the eve of WWII, nearly 50,000 Jews lived alongside many Poles (50% of the population), Ukrainians (35%), and ethnic Germans (5%).[15] These diverse groups had historically been able to coexist within the region's agrarian economy, but this framework was hardly idyllic and growing increasingly precarious with Poland's fascist turn in the 1920s and 1930s. The area's Jewish and Ukrainian minorities experienced widespread discrimination and alienation under the Second Republic, including the "revindication" of Orthodox Churches and state sponsored anti-Jewish boycotts.[16] Political antisemitism also increased, especially among urban Poles (middle class and intelligentsia), while traditional anti-Judaism and economic antagonism remained prevalent in the countryside.[17]

Xenophobia was not as salient in Chełm or Lublin Province compared to other parts of interwar Poland, where violence and antisemitic agitation were more common.[18] The region's most popular political parties (leftist peasant and socialist) were generally amenable to Chełm's multiethnic makeup, while one national activist described the degree of nationalism in 1936 as

in Antony Polonsky, Hanna Węgrzynek, and Andrzej Żbikowski, eds., *New Directions in the History of the Jews in the Polish Lands* (Brighton, 2018), 423–41.

14. On the spatial turn: Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (New York, 2010); Kate Brown, *A Biography of No Place: From Ethnic Borderland to Soviet Heartland* (Cambridge, Mass., 2005); Felix Schnell, *Räume des Schreckens: Gewalt und Gruppenmilitanz in der Ukraine 1905–1933* (Hamburg, 2012); Donald Bloxham, *The Final Solution: A Genocide* (Oxford, 2009). On integrative approaches: Christian Gerlach, *Extremely Violent Societies: Mass Violence in the Twentieth Century World* (Cambridge, 2010); Scott Straus, "The Limits of a Genocide Lens: Violence against Rwandans in the 1990s," *Journal of Genocide Research* 21, no. 4 (2019): 504–24.

15. The "Chełm region" largely constituted the counties of Chełm and Hrubieszów within the Lublin District of the General Government.

16. Mellech Bakalczuk-Felin, ed., *Yisker-bukh Chelm* (Johannesburg, 1954); Konrad Sadkowski, "From Ethnic Borderland to Catholic Fatherland: The Church, Christian Orthodox, and State Administration in the Chełm Region, 1918–1939," *Slavic Review*, 57, no. 4 (Winter 1998): 813–39.

17. Adam Puławski, "Problematyka żydowska w 'Kronice Nadbużańskiej,'" *Rocznik Chełmski*, vol. 17 (Chełm, 2013), 183–220.

18. On Lublin and Chełm: Jan Jachymek, *Oblicze społeczno-polityczne wsi lubelskiej, 1930–1939* (Lublin, 1975); Paweł Kiernikowski, *Miasto Chełm w okresie międzywojennym (1918–1939)* (Chełm, 2007); Mariusz Zajączkowski, *Ukraińskie podziemie na Lubelszczyźnie w okresie okupacji niemieckiej 1939–1944* (Lublin, 2015), 43–64; Alina Skibińska, "Powiat biłgorajski," in Barbara Engelking and Jan Grabowski, eds., *Dalej jest noc: losy Żydów w wybranych powiatach okupowanej Polski*, vol. 1 (Warsaw, 2018), 195–201. On regional variations of Polish identity, see Sara Bender, *In Enemy Land: The Jews of Kielce and the Region, 1939–1946* (Boston, 2018); Keely Stauter-Halsted, *The Nation in the Village: The Genesis of Peasant National Identity in Austrian Poland 1848–1914* (Ithaca, 2001); Jochen Böhler, *Civil War in Central Europe, 1918–1921: The Reconstruction of Poland* (Oxford, 2018); Kai Struve, "Polish Peasants in Eastern Galicia in the Interwar Period: Indifferent to the Nation or Pillars of Polishness?" *Acta Poloniae Historica* 109 (2014): 37–59.

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"lackluster."[19] Nevertheless, outside of some personal relationships, social integration remained limited between the groups. One Holocaust survivor remembered, "As a general rule, we lived separate lives—the Poles and the Jews," while a recent study of Polish-Ukrainian relations similarly observed that the two communities "lived in one country, not together but side by side."[20]

War and Nazi Terror

WWII worsened the poor state of interethnic relations under the Polish state. Chełm originally sat on the demarcation line between the Nazi and Soviet invaders, and consequently was involved in territorial handovers before the occupation zones were fixed. Wehrmacht soldiers conquered the region in mid-September 1939, but soon abandoned it to the Red Army (September 25–October 7) before the area was ceded back to the Third Reich. Throughout these exchanges, the area was thrown into constant upheaval, with lawless interludes and ample opportunities for locals to commit violence. For our purposes, the actions of Chełm's inhabitants during this initial period can help measure the extent to which prewar grudges and nationalist sentiments accounted for wartime violence.

The first significant cases of violence emerged out of the Soviet occupation, whose mechanisms of governance relied on coopting discontented residents (ethnic minorities and lower-class Poles) into ruling agencies.[21] Contemporary Polish accounts, which tend to ascribe wrongdoing to non-Polish ethnicities, alleged that Chełm's city offices and militia patrols were mostly staffed by Jewish and Ukrainian communists, together with newly released prisoners; this group performed a wave of arrests against Polish military officers, landlords, and government officials.[22] In the countryside, poor Polish and Ukrainian peasants, who had pushed for land reform during the interwar period, organized themselves into "citizen's committees" and asserted material demands from wealthier neighbors. Denunciations against rich landowners offered rural militiamen the pretext to conduct home inspections and steal valuables, while several affluent property owners were killed during this time.[23] Even after the Red Army's withdrawal in October 1939, many villagers continued to steal from wealthier residents. One Polish resident observed how dilapidated peasant huts came to possess luxurious furniture

19. Jachymek, *Oblicze społeczno-polityczne wsi lubelskiej*, 217.

20. Fortunoff Video Archive, HVT-2376: Account of Abraham D. (Jan. 17, 1991); Zajączkowski, *Ukraińskie podziemie*, 63–64.

21. Jan Gross, *Revolution from Abroad: The Soviet Conquest of Poland's Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia* (Princeton, 2002), 67, 117–19.

22. Hoover Institution Archives (HIA), Ministerstwo Informacji i Dokumentacji 1939–1945 (MID), Box 245, Folder 1, #7355: Account of Teodor Wichniewicz (Undated), #5189: Account of Józef Lewiński (Undated), and #10237: Account of Leon Kuczyński (Undated); Paweł Kiernikowski, "Wrzesień 1939 na ziemi chełmskiej," *Rocznik Chełmski*, t. 4 (1998), 140.

23. HIA, MID, Box 245, Folder 1, #1109: Account of Zbigniew Korb (April 17, 1943).

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and carpets, while traditionally barefooted children now walked around in fancy leather boots.[24]

Mistreatment, tied to the loss of political and social dominance, fostered ethnic resentment among many Poles. One resident was surprised by the Jewish and Ukrainian militia members, as they never before had such power over his life.[25] Jews became the focal point of Polish enmity, building on the popular interwar stereotype of "Jewish-communism" (*Żydokomuna*). One Polish nationalist, after decrying the "communist Jew Czwiling," who served as Chełm's commissioner, recalled with great exaggeration that "every Jew now assumed great power and courage."[26] A returning Polish soldier also angrily expressed in his diary how "every other Jew parades around with a rifle, and if not a rifle then a red armband," but directed considerably less aggravation towards poor Polish residents who also supported Soviet rule.[27]

In the two-day interval between the Red Army's withdrawal and the arrival of German soldiers, a number of Jews in Chełm and Siedliszcze fell victim to robberies and other attacks. A meager "citizen's guard" under Chełm's former mayor was established to maintain order, but at least some of the guardians participated in the pillaging.[28] According to Joel Ponczek, the "bad element" of the Polish population exploited the chaos and "ran rampant on the Jewish shops and plundered them all."[29] Regina Zielinski identified the actors as "hooligans," mostly comprised of unemployed Poles and recently released prisoners, and observed how vacant houses of Jews who had fled to the USSR were easy targets for break-ins.[30] While the economic nature of such raids is apparent, there was significant physical abuse, too. Kalmen Wewryk recalled how some Jews were dragged from their homes and beaten, sometimes to death.[31] Unfortunately, further details remain scant as many contemporary and postwar accounts fail to mention such attacks, when at least several Jews were killed.[32]

These initial attacks speak to the early dangers faced by Jews. The hardships of Soviet rule and stereotypes about "Jewish communism" amplified

24. Jerzy Masłowski, "Agresja sowiecka na Wołyniu i Ziemi Chełmskiej w świetle Pamiętnika Wincentego Pietrzykowskiego," in Tomasz Rodziewicz, ed., *Agresja sowiecka 17 września 1939 roku na Kresach Wschodnich i Lubelszczyźnie: Studia i materiały* (Lublin, 2011), 135–36.

25. Janusz Łosowski, "Krótka okupacja sowiecka widziana oczami czternastoletniego chłopca. Fragment rozmowy ze Stanisławem Kupczyńskim," *Agresja sowiecka*, 154.

26. Longin Tokarski, "Zapiski Wiesławy Skibińskiej o Chełmie, Niemcach I Sowietach we wrześniu 1939 roku," *Agresja sowiecka*, 143.

27. Wincenty Pietrzykowski, "Nieznany pamiętnik Wincentego Pietrzykowskiego," *Pro Patria: Magazyn Katolicko-Społeczny* 12, no. 2 (86): 32; Masłowski, "Agresja sowiecka," 133.

28. Manis Zitrin, "Eye Witness Accounts," *Yisker-bukh Chełm*, at www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/chelm/Che555.html#Page563 (accessed August 11, 2022).

29. Archiwum Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego (AŻIH), 302/104, Account of Joel Ponczek.

30. Andrew Zielinski, *Conversations with Regina* (Włodawa, 2008), 69.

31. Wewryk, *To Sobibor and Back*, 19.

32. Yad Vashem Archives (YVA), O.33/1852, Account of Hanka Kent; Visual History Archive (VHA), Interview 16387: Hanka Kent (18.6.1996); AŻIH, 302/104, Account of Joel Ponczek; VHA, Interview 36722: Helene Kurz (Oct. 29, 1997); Wewryk, *To Sobibor and Back*, 18.

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existing anti-Jewish sentiments, particularly among the Polish intelligentsia and middle class, while the disorder presented opportunities to actualize these beliefs. Nevertheless, most villages and smaller towns remained peaceable, as traditional (Christian) antisemitic attitudes proved insufficient to ignite violence. The relative containment of initial outbursts indicates the region was not yet a hotbed of anti-Jewish violence. In Skryhiczyn, one contemporary source among the Jewish underground reported that "relations between the mixed farmer population—Ukrainians, Poles, and Jews—were neighborly and harmonious," and noted that Jews were only victimized with the onset of Nazi occupation.[33]

The German arrival fundamentally altered the Jews' status, substantially increasing their vulnerability. Popular antisemitism was strengthened by Nazi propaganda, while non-Jewish residents now had the means to facilitate and benefit from the persecution of their Jewish countrymen.[34] In these dire circumstances, the breadth of local support and assistance for Jews is striking, particularly given the behavior and attitudes towards Jews in later years.

One of the worst atrocities carried out in the early stages of WWII involved the December 1939 death march of Jewish men from Chełm and Hrubieszów. Following a visit from General Governor Hans Frank, German police and civilian administrators demanded military-age Jewish males report to Chełm's town square before they were forcibly marched to the Bug River and expelled into Soviet-occupied territory. Jewish men in Hrubieszów were made to join them along the way. Following a hellish trek consisting of constant beatings and shootings, perhaps several hundred Jews from the starting group of a few thousand managed to reach the border, where they were left to die by Nazi police after being refused entry by Soviet guards. Most were too exhausted to return home, and many soon died from various wounds and illnesses. In response, peasants often helped rehabilitate the expellees by taking the Jews into their homes and nursing them back to health.[35] One survivor later testified that in the wake of the gruesome march, "many of us were helped by Christian inhabitants."[36] Another victim remembered that rural villagers, who he called "zoological antisemites," ignored their prejudices and "hasted to our aid and helped us; they gave us money and clothing, and they assisted some to re-cross the border."[37]

The care provided to survivors of the December 1939 march was exceptional for its life-saving importance and large scale, but many other charitable acts can be observed during the early stages of Nazi persecution. After the imposition of a heavy tax levy on Chełm's Jewish community, the town's

33. AŻIH, ARG I 1006 (Ring. I/913), Account on Skryhiczyn (Jan. 1942), in Joseph Kermish, ed., *To Live with Honor and Die with Honor!: Selected Documents from the Warsaw Ghetto Underground Archives "O.S" ("Oneg Shabbath")* (Jerusalem, 1986), 209.

34. Cała, *Eternal Enemy*, 241–42.

35. YVA, M.2/235, Account of Dr. J. L. (Oct. 11, 1940).

36. Bundesarchiv (BArch), B162/4325, Testimony of Samuel Fox (Jan. 14, 1963), 1218.

37. State of Israel, Ministry of Justice, *The Trial of Adolf Eichmann, Record of Proceedings* (1993), Volume I, Session No. 21, Testimony of Zvi Pachter (May 1, 1961), at www.nizkor.org/hweb/people/e/eichmann-adolf/transcripts/Sessions/Session-021-01.html (no longer available).

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Polish intelligentsia donated large amounts of food and money for relief.[38] Less generous, but no less important, were the Polish and Ukrainian fishermen who agreed to transport Jews across the Bug River. While some boatmen took advantage of the skewed circumstances and robbed their passengers, many Jews and their families were successfully smuggled to Soviet territory without incident.[39] Indeed, it was on account of such amiable interactions that the earliest contemporary report by the Jewish underground in the Chełm region, while scornfully noting the role of "Jewish criminals and Polish 'plebs'" in property theft, observed "mutual relations between the Polish and Jewish populations are good."[40]

More insights into the initial tenor of Jewish-Christian relations can be found in the accounts of non-native Jews who fled to the area during the early years of German rule. The Lublin District broadly became a destination for Jewish refugees from other parts of occupied Poland because of the increased availability of food and laxer restrictions on movement, both of which enabled significant contacts with the non-Jewish population.[41] Newly arrived Jews often worked on local farms and traded with peasant villagers, finding such encounters to be more tolerable and cooperative than from where they came.

Michael Temchin, a physician who fled to Grabowiec, played cards and spent evenings together with local Christians between 1941 and 1942. For Temchin, "there was not any type of Polish-Jewish problem in the village. They lived rather well together; they knew each other since they were children."[42] A Jewish woman reported that the Jewish community in Hrubieszów was able to maintain a key lifeline through economic trade with the surrounding population, including dealings with peasants on the black market.[43] "It was far from a paradise," wrote David Mandelbaum, who escaped to Hrubieszów from Warsaw in the summer of 1941, but living conditions represented a considerable improvement over the former Polish capital and "social coexistence with the outnumbered Polish population was very good and loyal on their part." Only some Ukrainian "hooligans" were deplored by Mandelbaum for their part in instigating Nazi repressions against Jews.[44]

38. AŻIH, ARG I 708 (Ring. I/818), Events in Chełm to January 1940, in Aleksandra Bańkowska, ed., Archiwum *Ringelbluma: Konspiracyjne Archiwum Getta Warszawy*, vol. 6, *Generalne gubernatorstwo relacje i dokumenty* (Warsaw, 2012), 95–96; Samuel Kassow, *Who Will Write Our History?: Emanuel Ringelblum, the Warsaw Ghetto, and the Oyneg Shabes Archive* (Bloomington, 2007), 275.

39. VHA, Interview 28827: Celia Feldman (May 1, 1997); Interview 11205: Fira Silberbach (6.3.1996); Interview 41452: Sol Gruber (May 26, 1998); HVT-2234: Jack G. (Dec. 1, 1992); Harold Werner, *Fighting Back: A Memoir of Jewish Resistance* (New York, 1992), 20. On fishermen betraying Jews, YVA, M.20/134, Report from occupied Poland (circa Nov. 1943).

40. AŻIH, ARG I 708 (Ring. I/818), Account on Chełm (Nov. 30, 1939), *Archiwum Ringelbluma*. t. 6, 95–96.

41. David Silberklang, *Gates of Tears: The Holocaust in the Lublin District* (Jerusalem, 2013), 195–96.

42. YVA, O.3/3850, Account of Michael Temchin (Dec. 3, 1971).

43. AŻIH, ARG I 770 (Ring. I/814), Dychterman's account, "Hrubieszów-Poland's Granary" (June 30, 1942), *Archiwum Ringelbluma*, t. 6, 118–29.

44. AŻIH, ARG I 768 (Ring. I/810), Dawid Mandelbaum's account "Hrubieszów" (July 10, 1942), *Archiwum Ringelbluma*, t. 6, 130–34. The Polish population actually

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The first two years of WWII are crucial to understanding the history of interethnic relations and communal violence in the Chełm region. In many ways, this period can be seen as a litmus test for the region's prewar volatility. By any objective measure, Chełm's multicultural society failed to withstand the challenges and pressures after the downfall of the Polish state. Not only did a collective identity (Polish citizenship) fail to unite the population, but violence broke out, including a wave of anti-Jewish attacks in October 1939. By and large, however, these attacks remained isolated, as existing enmities and the larger potential for violence were not actualized.

This uneasy situation took a tragic turn after the spring of 1942, when interethnic encounters were recast within a setting of pervasive violence. As part of the Third Reich's genocidal efforts to remake eastern Europe, two camps of mass destruction were established in the Chełm region: Stalag 319 and the Sobibor death camp, where some 100,000 Soviet POWs and 200,000 Jews were killed. Although these sites represented the most extreme form of Nazi violence, the entire occupied population was subjected to protracted terror. One of the worst atrocities occurred already in January 1940, when some 400 patients in Chełm's psychiatric hospital were machine gunned by local Gestapo, but the breadth and intensity of Nazi violence continued to escalate against multiple groups. Local farmers were pushed to the brink of starvation in 1942, the first year when the General Government delivered massive amounts of foodstuffs to the Reich, while 24,000 Poles and Ukrainians from Chełm and Hrubieszów counties were taken to Germany for forced labor by June 1943.[45] Furthermore, once the area's Jewish population had been murdered, the Germans launched the Zamość action in late 1942, a campaign involving the expulsion of Polish residents and the settlement of ethnic Germans and Ukrainians into the Lublin District.

Nazi policies converged on the ground to create a new social reality, where every person experienced violence in some form.[46] Zygmunt Klukowski, whose wartime diary is one of the most revealing sources of Polish attitudes in the eastern Lublin District, captured the climate of fear that permeated occupied society. In August 1942, Klukowski wrote: "Everywhere terror is rising, and it is increasingly difficult to withstand. Everyone asks themselves whether they will last until the end of the war. . . . In a very literal sense, we are living from day to day."[47] In such a distressing environment, and without

outnumbered the Ukrainian population in Hrubieszów county, but the demographic balance was fairly close.

45. US National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), RG 242, T501/228, Report on laborers sent to Reich, September 1939–June 1943 (undated and unpaginated). On economic exploitation, Czesław Rajca, *Walka o chleb, 1939–1944: Eksploatacja rolnictwa w Generalnym Gubernatorstwie* (Lublin, 1991).

46. Note that one does not have to be a casualty or direct victim to be affected by violence.

47. Zygmunt Klukowsk, *Dziennik z lat okupacji Zamojszczyzy (1939–1944)* (Lublin, 1959), 279, (Aug. 20, 1942). Klukowski's published diary was altered from the original manuscript, but it remains an immensely valuable source. Dariusz Libionka, "Polacy wobec eksterminacji Żydów: Kilka uwag na marginesie czytania źródeł," in S. Buryła abd P. Rodak, eds., *Wojna, doświadczenie i zapis. Nowe źródła, problemy, metody badawcze* (Kraków, 2006), 71–90.

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realistic pathways to circumvent the devastating impact of Nazi cruelty, the dominant motivation in most people's behavior became their own personal well-being. According to a late 1943 report by the Polish underground, "terror still casts a shadow over the General Government, keeping people in constant fear of their own life and the lives of their loved ones, and they forget about everything else."[48]

The crisis that overtook Polish society produced a wide range of responses, matching Pitirim Sorokin's sociological concept of "polarization" during calamities.[49] Many residents acclimated to their surroundings by growing callous to the suffering of others. After more than 20,000 Warthegau Poles were deported to the Chełm region in the late summer of 1940, Polish relief councils reached out to peasants for donations to support the displaced persons. While some locals provided food or shelter, particularly estate owners who offered shelter in exchange for field labor, there was a general shortage of charity in the countryside. Polish welfare workers explained this scarcity as the result of people being scared and impoverished.[50] Such self-absorption increased with the escalation in Nazi violence and economic exploitation. In October 1942, as the Germans were beginning the liquidation of Chełm's ghetto and sending thousands of Jews to Sobibor, the local Polish aid committee reported "the attitude of Polish society to issues of social care should be considered rather negative. The population is already so dejected, fatigued, and scared that it is indifferent to everything."[51]

As empathy fell, there was a decline of benevolent behavior and a greater willingness to violate traditional norms. A courageous few stood out from this development, becoming ennobled to help others, whether for pride, religion, or otherwise. Overall, however, alcoholism, corruption, and other "social pathologies" permeated occupied society.[52] Violence also became increasingly incentivized and normalized in this context, making ethnic animus more dangerous but not altogether necessary for brutalities to occur.

Local Complicity and Betrayal during the Holocaust

The destruction of the Jewish communities in the Chełm region represented part of the second and climactic stage of the Holocaust in Poland. Between March 1942 and November 1943, nearly two million Polish Jews were murdered as part of Operation Reinhard, mostly in the death camps

48. US Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), RG-15.043M, Reel 2, Report for November-December 1943, 130.

49. Pitirim Sorokin, *Man and Society in Calamity* (New York, 1942).

50. Among others: Archiwum Państwowe w Lublinie (APL), 616/93, Report of Hrubieszów County for April–June 1941, 241; APL, 616/77, Report of Dubienka delegate (June 19, 1941), 45.

51. APL, 616/91, Report of PKO Chełm for October 1942, 1048. This is not to say that Poles did not contribute. Donations came largely from wealthy estate owners and urbanized intelligentsia or office workers, and less from smaller landholders and working poor, who made up the majority population. See Janusz Kłapeć, *Rada Główna Opiekuńcza w dystrykcie lubelskim w latach 1940–1944* (Lublin, 2011).

52. Stanisław Salmonowicz, "Patologie społeczne okresu okupacji hitlerowskiej," *Czasy Nowożytne* 3 (1997): 5–20.

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of Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka. The genocide of Jews inside the General Government did not end with the liquidation of the ghettos, however, but continued with the "hunt" (*Judenjagd*) for the 250,000 remaining survivors. The German police force was inadequate, both in size and ability, to carry out the manhunt for fugitive Jews on its own. This meant that Jewish chances of survival hinged largely on the decisions and behavior of local Poles and Ukrainians.[53]

For their part, German police and civil administrators actively sought to "involve the broad masses of Polish society" in the hunt for Jews.[54] This was partially achieved by offering incentives for denouncing Jews, including bounties of sugar or cash; indeed, German policemen deployed to the Chełm region later recalled cases of Poles seeking rewards for delivering Jews.[55] The threat of capital punishment also spurred compliance and complicity with Nazi measures. Already in October 1941, General Governor Hans Frank introduced the death penalty for anyone caught sheltering Jews outside of their demarcated ghettos or residential areas. Similar threats would be repeated by lower-level administrators, typically around the commencement of anti-Jewish deportations. For instance, on October 22, 1942, just before the liquidation of the Hrubieszów ghetto, the county Kreishauptmann ordered: "Every resident who encounters a Jew is obliged to immediately hand them over to the nearest police station. Whoever *shelters, feeds, or anyway helps a Jew* will be punished with *death*."[56] While such orders were not uniformly applied, the gravity of such threats was evident based on other Nazi actions, including a May 1942 pacification operation that left hundreds dead and imprisoned across the eastern Lublin District.[57]

Yad Vashem has recognized some thirty-seven individuals from across the Chełm region as Righteous Among the Nations for risking their lives to save Jews during the Nazi occupation. Outside of this courageous cohort, local Poles and Ukrainians largely reacted with indifference and aversion to the Jews' plight. The Polizeireiterabteilung-III, a mounted police battalion deployed to the eastern Lublin District and responsible for waging war against hapless Jews, observed this. In January 1943, one of its squadrons reported: "The Jewish question should be considered as solved. Jews were only occasionally able to stay in the forests and, since they are not supported by the population, have largely been depleted. Their number is constantly decreasing."[58] The unit followed up the next month: "Since the population acts negatively towards the Jews, their physical condition is exhausted."[59]

53. Yehuda Bauer, *The Death of the Shtetl* (New Haven, 2009), 92–151.

54. Grabowski, *Hunt for Jews*, 55–59.

55. BArch, B162/6188, Testimony of Karl Schroedel (April 23, 1964), 890.

56. Bogdan Musiał, *Deutsche Zivilverwaltung und Judenverfolgung im Generalgouvernement: eine Fallstudie zum Distrikt Lublin, 1939–1944* (Wiesbaden, 1999), 309. Emphasis in original.

57. On the May 1942 pacification: Jason Tingler, "At the Crossroads of Genocide and Mass Murder: The Chełm Region during World War II," in Avinoam Patt and Erin McGlothlin, eds., *Lessons and Legacies*, vol. 5 (forthcoming).

58. APL, 514/38, Report for January 1943 (Jan 28, 1943), 25.

59. APL, 514/38, Report for February 1943 (Feb. 24, 1943), 42.

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Beyond failing to support Jews in their time of need, many residents joined in the genocidal process. Polizeireiterabteilung-III recorded in early 1943 that "individual Jews are very often seized by the population and handed over to the police."[60] In December 1942, a group of locals armed with hatches and clubs in Hrubieszów County, at the enticement of German administrators, led Nazi police to five hideouts where sixty-five "bandits"—likely Jews—were killed.[61] Public hunts were sometimes initiated by village leaders, such as in Zamołodycze where twenty-six Jews were caught by the local population and delivered to the Germans, while Polish Blue Police played a pivotal role in the capture and murder of escaped Jews throughout Poland.[62] According to the former "Gasmeister" of Sobibor, Erich Bauer, Polish policemen even delivered several Panje wagons of apprehended Jews directly to the death camp in late summer 1943.[63]

Popular antisemitism presents an obvious explanation for the antipathy to Jewish fugitives, and this remains the conventional explanation in the literature on the Holocaust in Poland.[64] Certainly, the prevailing anti-Jewish sentiments created a climate in which the elimination of Jews from daily life could be supported, or at least tacitly accepted, by a significant share of the population. Passengers on a train from Hrubieszów to Warsaw commented approvingly on the deportation actions, while members of a Home Army unit in the Lublin District observed in spring 1943: "The opinion is often heard that it's a blessing for us that there are no more Jews."[65] Such attitudes were not one-dimensional, though, and local antisemites did not always agree with Nazi methods. According to an underground informant, Poles witnessed the liquidation of Chełm's ghetto in late 1942 "sharply and directly," and "even people who had always considered themselves antisemites were shaken to their core by the terrible, organized murder of the Jews."[66] The rescue activity of Zofia Kossak-Szczucka, who held anti-Jewish prejudices throughout the war, highlights the complexity in judging wartime behavior as derived from preexisting beliefs.[67]

To better understand local responses, it is useful to consider the behavior of Christian friends and acquaintances who were often the first people that Jews turned to in their time of need. Partly owing to prewar antisemitism

60. APL, 514/38, Report for January 1943 (Jan. 27, 1943), 18.

61. NARA, T501/225, Report of OFK Lublin (Dec. 21, 1942), 1272.

62. Werner, *Fighting Back*, 77–86; Grabowski, *Hunt for Jews*.

63. BArch, B162/3749, Interrogation of Erich Bauer (Jan. 16, 1963), 1366.

64. Daniel Blatman, "Polish Antisemitism: A National Psychosis?" in Ezra Mendelsohn, ed., *Studies in Contemporary Jewry*, vol. 23 (Oxford, 2008), 213–26.

65. AŻIH, ARG I 770 (Ring. I/814), Dychterman's account, "Hrubieszów-Poland's Granary" (June 30, 1942), *Archiwum Ringelbluma*, t.6, Document #37, 128; Dariusz Libionka, "ZWZ-AK i Delegatura Rządu wobec eksterminacji Żydów Polskich," in Andrzej Żbikowski, ed., *Polacy i Żydzi pod okupacją niemiecką 1939–1945: Studia i materiały* (Warsaw, 2006), 130.

66. Archiwum Akt Nowych (AAN), 1325/202/II-29, Report on the Lublin region (Feb. 17, 1943), 60.

67. Rachel Feldhay Brenner, "Polka-Katoliczka and the Holocaust: The Enigma of Zofia Kossak," *Yad Vashem Studies* 45, no. 2 (2017): 125–59.

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and communal distance, social networks were not extensive between Jews and non-Jews before the occupation. Nevertheless, some of these bonds paid important dividends. Among the thirty-seven recognized rescuers in the region, more than half had relationships with their Jewish dependents before the war. More often, however, these connections failed to offer relief. According to Joel Ponczek, within days after he escaped the liquidation of Chełm's ghetto, "I used up all my (Christian) contacts and now I did not know where to go."[68] The reluctance of Christian friends to help Jews played an integral part in the latter's downfall, as without allies and protection, their means of survival were extremely limited.

Even worse than refusal was the sudden betrayal by trusted acquaintances. In the early stages of the war, many Jews across the Chełm region—like elsewhere in Poland—placed valuables with non-Jews for safekeeping, lest they fall into Nazi hands. By 1942 and 1943, when surviving Jews returned in desperate need of their belongings, most of the appointed guardians betrayed them. For instance, Cypora Korn's father, Mordechai Frydman, the owner of a windmill and granary in Nowy Orzechów, stored his fortune with a Christian peasant. In the autumn of 1942, when Mordechai went to retrieve some of his money, "the peasant seized my father and delivered him to Oscimów (likely Uścimów), to the Germans, who killed him."[69]

Such treachery often arose from unexpected quarters. In the woods around Leszczany, sometime in 1943, the Orthodox Ukrainian Włodymyr Brzeczko and his neighbor Władysław Wolodiuk invited Rywka Segał and two other family members to stay in Brzeczko's barn, for a fee. The Jews had been farmers in the area and knew both Ukrainians from before the war. Even though they were staying with other Jews in the forest, Rywka's family accepted the invitation because "living in the woods was hard." Although Segał's family was keeping up with their payments, within a week, Brzeczko and Wolodiuk began luring their guests out and murdering them with axes, divvying up their possessions amongst themselves. Segał was the only one to make it off the property alive.[70]

Places of refuge could transform into sites of persecution for many reasons, including extreme terror. 15-year-old Yankiel Kuperblum escaped from the Warsaw ghetto earlier in the war and came to the village of Kulik, where he and his uncle found shelter with Helena Pejszak, later recognized as a Righteous Among the Nations. Sometime in the fall of 1942, Pejszak and other villagers were gathered in the nearby town of Siedliszcze to watch the public torture and execution of a resident caught hiding an escaped POW. Peszjak returned home that evening terrified. In the following days, not only did she demand her guests leave the property, but she tried to persuade Kuperblum to enter German captivity so as not to implicate her. Kuperblum recalled his disbelief during this encounter: "The same Mrs. Paizak who fed me, who bathed

68. AŻIH, 302/104, Account of Joel Ponczek.

69. YVA, O.3/2019, Account of Cypora (Frydman) Korn (Jan. 17, 1962).

70. USHMM, RG-15.177M, Reel 3, SSKL 70, Testimony of Rywka Segał (April 8, 1945), 13; Protocol of the main hearing (June 23, 1945), 33–36.

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me once in a basin of warm water, who once even told me that she thought of me as her own son. This same woman wished to sacrifice me now."[71]

Although antisemitism undoubtedly contributed to local complicity in the murder of Jews, the break in character from many Poles and Ukrainians was a powerful signifier of a vicious transformation under German occupation. From visiting the rural areas of the General Government, Zofia Kossak-Szczucka found that while rural attitudes were initially "humane, logical, and understandable" towards Jews, she concluded after the summer of 1942 that Nazi brutality had "dulled the moral sensibilities" and paved the way for peasants to take part in the extermination themselves.[72] Zygmunt Klukowski observed a similarly "strange brutalization of peasants in relation to the Jews," finding that "some kind of psychosis had engulfed the people" of Biłgoraj County as they actively hunted down Jewish fugitives.[73] More locally, Michael Temchin, a Jewish physician hiding near Grabowiec, remembered the initial benevolence of the local population but noted: "Gradually, however, there came a change for the worse. . . . I felt that my Gentile friends were beginning to resent me."[74]

Beyond the conundrums they faced in their search for survival, Holocaust escapees were thus caught in an emergent process where social behavior trended in the worst possible way. Whereas many Christians provided support to Chełm's Jews during the early years of WWII, evidence indicates that cases of popular aid became increasingly rare by mid-1942 while the number of attacks and denunciations rose. Existent (prewar) antisemitism facilitated the speed and scale of this shift, but as the burden of Nazi occupation rose, even people with whom Jews had positive relationships now proved willing to abuse their former neighbors. As historian Jan Grabowski observed elsewhere in Poland, "Jewish life, which had steadily lost its value from the beginning of the occupation, became virtually worthless after the liquidation of the ghettos."[75] Rather than limited to Jews, however, this development represented part of a broader devaluation of life in occupied society, a process that engendered other types of popular violence.

Social Violence against Non-Jews

Escaped POWs in Chełm's Countryside

Before Chełm's Jews fled en masse in the spring of 1942, another group had already started running for their lives across the region. Polish historians estimate that 30,000 of the 500,000 Soviet POWs imprisoned on Polish territory escaped Nazi captivity, including several thousand from the Stalag 319 complex based in the Chełm region.[76] With little knowledge of their

71. YVA, M.31.2/5006, Account of Jack Kuper (Dec. 19, 1988); Jack Kuper, *Child of the Holocaust* (Toronto, 1968), 68.

72. Feliks Tych, *Długi cień zagłady: szkice historyczne* (Warsaw, 1999), 43.

73. Klukowski, *Dziennik*, (Nov. 26, 1942), 299.

74. Michael Temchin, *The Witch Doctor: Memoir of a Partisan* (New York, 1992), 72.

75. Grabowski, *Hunt for Jews*, 83.

76. Incomplete German records indicate at least 6,000 Soviet POWs escaped German camps in the General Government during the winter of 1941/42. NARA, T501/221, 968 (Nov. 27. 1941), 967 (Dec. 2, 1941), 1115 (Dec. 16, 1941), and 833 (Feb. 2, 1942).

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surroundings, the lives of runaway POWs depended significantly on the responses of the occupied population. Certainly, some prisoners benefited from local generosity, but the extent of popular support has largely been overstated in communist-era scholarship. The narrative of Polish society allying itself with Soviet soldiers was obviously beneficial to the postwar People's Republic and persists among contemporary historians seeking to highlight Polish philanthropy towards non-Poles (particularly Soviet POWs and Jews).[77] It is not hard to find compelling reasons to be critical of this idealized depiction, however, as shown by a recent study of the Polish underground's suspicion and hostility towards "Bolshevik bandits."[78]

Fugitive POWs did not experience the same degree of cultural prejudice as did Jews, but situational factors still inhibited sympathetic people from offering sustained aid. Few of the prisoners escaped the internment camps with anything more than tattered clothes, meaning there was little compensation for local hosts to assume the costs of shelter. German authorities called on village heads and residents to report any Red Army runaways to the nearest police agency, threatening whole villages with collective punishment while anyone caught abetting escaped POWs could be executed.[79] Such measures frequently discouraged good-natured residents from helping needy Soviet POWs. The Jewish survivor Harold Werner recalled an illustrative incident during his stay with an Orthodox family outside Włodawa in the winter of 1941/42:

> During a big snowstorm, we heard a knock on the door. Nobody answered the knock, and the village dogs attacked the Russians outside. We heard them pleading, "Let us in, in the name of God, we are freezing to death." No one answered. The prisoners left, and I heard Stephan tell his wife that he was sorry for them. Stephan's mother-in-law crossed herself, unhappy to have turned the Russians away. She said that, after all, they were their Christian brothers in the eyes of the church, and uttered: "May God help them."[80]

Beyond simple coercion, German agencies sometimes offered bounties for seizing Soviet fugitives. Already in October 1941, months before Operation Reinhard was unleashed against Poland's Jews, 100 złotys were tendered in exchange for delivering escaped prisoners in Lublin, a figure that later rose to 10,000 złotys on the order of the General Government's Higher SS and Police Leader, Friedrich-Wilhelm Krüger.[81] Moreover, the Kreishauptmann of Sokołów-Węgrów County (Warsaw District) offered a pair of boots for capturing one Soviet POW, new shoes and clothes for delivering two or three, a milk cow for five, and a whole farm to reward six or more.[82]

77. Kazimierz Przybysz, *Pomoc społeczna na wsi polskiej 1939–1945* (Warsaw, 1990).

78. Adam Puławski, "Sowiecki partyzant-polski problem," *Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość* 9, no. 1 (2006), 217–54.

79. NARA, T992/8, vol. 26, Hans Frank Diary, Session on the security situation in the Lublin District (May 29, 1943), 428.

80. Werner, *Fighting Back*, 70. Stephan was the head of the family.

81. AAN, 1325/202/III/28, Report on the Nazi treatment of Soviet POWs (Oct. 24, 1941), 470. A facsimile of Krüger's announcement is published in Józef Fajkowski, *Wieś w ogniu: Eksterminacja wsi polskiej w okresie okupacji hitlerowskiej* (Warsaw, 1972).

82. Leszek Gorycki, "Stosunek ludności cywilnej do jeńców sowieckich w niewoli niemieckiej II wojna światowa," in Jakub Wojtkowiak, ed., *Jeńcy sowieccy na ziemiach polskich w czasie II wojny światowej* (Warsaw, 2015), 129

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Through this mixture of incentives and intimidation, many Soviet POWs fell victim to the same village security apparatus that targeted Jewish fugitives.[83] On July 6, 1942 in Malinówka, village guards captured three fugitive POWs. The guards were poor deportees from Poznań (Warthegau), and the local gendarmerie official requested they be rewarded with a complete suit of clothes.[84] Several weeks later, two Soviet POWs were seized near Hańsk by three Polish policemen, who guarded the captives for several hours until German gendarmes arrived and shot them.[85]

Even ordinary residents could prove willing helpers in this rural dragnet. A villager in Kaplonosy captured and delivered a Red Army fugitive to a Ukrainian police post during the autumn of 1941, while another peasant near Siedliszcze apprehended two Soviet POWs and handed them over to Nazi police.[86] Denunciations also presented an ever-looming threat for prospective rescuers. On March 8, 1942, three Soviet POWs arrived at the homes of three different women in Rudka, begging for food and a place to sleep. Several Polish policemen from Ruda-Opalin arrived early the next morning upon learning of the fugitives' presence. After catching and torturing one of the POWs for information about his past whereabouts, the police arrested the three women. While one of the hosts was penalized with a 100 złoty fine, the other two were handed over to the gendarmerie along with the three POWs. All five were shot.[87] Such cases indicate why, much like hiding Jews, aiding Soviet escapees was largely a private affair.[88]

The Emergence of Partisans and "Bandits"

Spurned by rural society, many Jewish and Soviet escapees took refuge in the dense forests of the Lublin District. While these two groups had the most to run from, they were joined by a growing number of residents trying to escape Nazi oppression during the second half of 1942. Thousands of Polish evacuees from Zamość and Hrubieszów counties became forest dwellers as a result of the ongoing displacements in Zamojszczyzna. In addition, the number of people derelict in their labor assignments began to rise at this time, while many hungry farmers, who had been strapped by exorbitant contingents

83. Tomasz Frydel, "Judenjagd: Reassessing the Role of Ordinary Poles as Perpetrators in the Holocaust?," in Timothy Williams and Susanne Buckley-Zistel, eds., *Perpetrators and Perpetration of Mass Violence: Actions, Motivations, and Dynamics* (New York, 2018), 187–203; Andrzej Żbikowski, "'Night Guard': Holocaust Mechanisms in the Polish Rural Areas, 1942–1945: Preliminary Introduction into Research," *East European Politics & Societies* 25, no. 3 (August 2011): 512–29.

84. YVA, O.53/68, Gendarmeriezug Lublin to Hauptmannschaft Lublin (June 8, 1942), 65–67.

85. USHMM, RG-15.175M, Reel 14, SAL 75. Testimony of Jan Kozlowski (Oct. 2, 1947), 5; Interrogation of Edward Fusiarz (Dec. 23, 1949), 211.

86. Archiwum Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej (AIPN) Lublin, SSKL 58, Trial of Piotr Daciuk; SWL 21, Trial of Mikołaj Rutkowski.

87. USHMM, RG-15.176M, Reel 16, SOL 22, Trial of Jan Wielebski, 102–24.

88. Julian Tobiasz focuses exclusively on the support provided by Polish society, but briefly concedes this point. Julian Tobiasz, *Na tyłach wroga: obywatele radzieccy w ruchu oporu na ziemiach polskich: 1941–1945* (Warsaw, 1972), 81.

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and whose scarce supplies dwindled with every passing week, increasingly turned to thievery for sustenance.[89]

This mass of outlaws provided crucial manpower for nascent partisan organizations, which had only developed a meager presence through late 1942. Units of the Home Army, People's Army, Peasant Battalions, and other unaffiliated gangs soon proliferated throughout the region, but cooperation between the forces remained limited. The perils of surviving on the edge of society favored distrust of anyone seeking to join the armed groups, reinforcing discriminatory stereotypes: women were largely excluded while ethnic minorities were often deemed untrustworthy for their perceived disloyalty to the Second Republic. Moreover, Jews were frequently treated like they were radioactive because of the increased risk of Nazi patrols. Even Fiodor Kowalow, the local commander of the Communist People's Army and the most supportive partisan leader towards Jewish escapees in the region, considered expelling his group's Jews because of the added danger they posed.[90]

Partisan and criminal groups lived largely at the expense of the rural population, but under the crushing weight of Nazi expropriations, few farmers willingly donated their goods. This forced all groups, irrespective of their ethnopolitical background, to confiscate materials from neighboring communities.[91] The number of robberies in the Lublin District skyrocketed from ninety-six in January 1942 to more than 2,300 per month by the spring of 1943, while the Polish underground declared in June 1943: "banditry now presents one of the heaviest and most dangerous plagues in the Polish province."[92] Indeed, the crime wave made up the greatest share of illegal activity reported by German forces for most of the war.[93]

Food was the primary objective of such incursions, but attackers often helped themselves to other things. Clothing, money, and jewelry were routinely plundered, as was livestock and alcohol.[94] Many house raids also occasioned wanton acts of violence. Beatings were frequent while killings were not uncommon. Seventeen civilian residents were killed in Chełm County alone

89. NARA, T501/215, Report from OFK Lublin (June 19, 1942), 939–40;

90. Shmuel Krakowski, *War of the Doomed: Jewish Resistance in Poland, 1942–1944* (New York, 1984), 31.

91. John Lowell Armstrong, "The Polish Underground and the Jews: A Reassessment of Home Army Commander Tadeusz Bór-Komorowski's Order 116 against Banditry," *Slavonic and East European Review* 72, no. 2 (April 1994), 259–76.

92. NARA, T501/217, OFK Lublin Report (April 24, 1943), 234; US NARA, T992/8, vol. 25, Diary of Hans Frank, 419 (May 29, 1943); APL, 498/68, Report of Chełm County (May 5, 1943), 132; Janusz Gmitruk, Arkadiusz Indraszczyk, and Adam Koseski; eds., *Pro memoria, 1941–1944: Raporty Departamentu Informacji Delegatury Rządu RP na Kraj o zbrodniach na narodzie polskim* (Warsaw, 2005), 398–99.

93. Piotr Majewski and Jan Vajskebr, "Sytuacja w Generalnym Gubernatorstwie w świetle niemieckich statystyk policyjnych. Próba analizy ilościowej," *Przegląd Historyczny*, vol. 107 (2016), 581–618.

94. NARA, T501/216, Report for September 1942 (Oct. 5, 1942), 1101; T501/225, Report for October 1942 (Nov. 12, 1942), 1452; Report for November 1942 (Dec. 15, 1942), 1326; Report for December 1942 (Dec. 29, 1942), 1308; OFK Lublin Report (Nov. 18, 1942), 1383.

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between January and May 1943.[95] There remained a steady number of lethal attacks throughout the year; for example, two shepherd boys discovered a decapitated body near the village of Sobibór in September 1943, later determined to be a Polish farmer who had been abducted days earlier from nearby Wola Uhruska.[96] Sexual assaults also spiked. The Jewish partisan leader Yechiel Grynszpan recounted how Kowalow's partisans regularly "went after women," while a physician in Biłgoraj County examined a growing number of female patients who became pregnant or contracted sexually transmitted diseases from rape.[97]

This type of behavior alienated a growing segment of the population. The Germans would punish farmers for missing foodstuffs, but not providing anything to partisans could also lead to retribution. Even if they had little to eat, some fearful peasants kept a separate stockpile of goods just for partisans.[98] Chełm's Kreishauptmann Werner Ansel reported that individuals approached gendarmerie bases "again and again" asking for weapons to defend themselves from robbery.[99] Alongside any political opposition, enmity toward partisan requisitions likely played a key role behind a number of rural denunciations. As one resident in Pieszowola stated after the war, "the village has eyes and ears, and there were those who informed the Germans" about guerilla activities.[100]

Polish-Ukrainian Violence

As a consequence of the rise in popular and resistant violence, Polish-Ukrainian relations grew increasingly acrimonious after the spring of 1942. Until that point, the Lublin branch of the Home Army reported that "moments of good relations. . .were not uncommon."[101] Many ordinary Ukrainians remained disinterested in national exigencies, despite concerted efforts by the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and Ukrainian relief committee to inculcate a nationalist spirit among the region's Orthodox and Greek Catholic population.[102] Indeed, the OUN had historically received little support in this region, and once a large cohort of nationalist Ukrainian émigrés returned to Galicia in the wake of Operation Barbarossa, the cultural and social organizations they had devised during their stay around Chełm between

95. NARA, T992/8, Vol. 26, Hans Frank Diary, Meeting on Lublin District security (May 29, 1943), 419; APL, 498/68, Report of Chełm County (March 8, 1943), 124; Report of Chełm County (May 5, 1943), 132.

96. USHMM, RG-15.011M, Reel 8, File 107, KdO Lublin Telegram (Sept. 21, 1943), 18.

97. VHA, Interview 27879: Chil Grynszpan (April 4, 1997); Klukowski, *Dziennik*, 290 (Oct. 21, 1942), 319–20 (Feb. 22, 1943).

98. Wewryk, *To Sobibor and Back*, 124.

99. APL, 498/68, Report of KH Chełm for April 1943 (May 5, 1943), 131.

100. Krystyna Kersten and Tomasz Szarota, *Wieś polska 1939–1948*, vol. 3 (Warsaw, 1970), 333.

101. Ireneusz Caban and Zygmunt Mańkowski, eds., *Zwiazek Walki Zbrojnej i Armia Krajowa*, vol. 2 (Lublin, 1971), 28.

102. Paweł Markiewicz, "The Ukrainian Central Committee, 1940–1945: A Case of Collaboration in Nazi-Occupied Poland" (PhD diss., Jagiellonian University, 2018).

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1939 and 1941 largely became defunct due to a shortage of local supporters.[103] One nationalist activist further confided in mid-1943 that "Ukrainians in the Lublin District are not a 100% conscious element."[104]

Nevertheless, the emergence of armed groups was framed by a simmering political conflict between Poles and Ukrainians.[105] Following the dictum of *dīvide et imperā*, German rulers dispensed favorable treatment to the Ukrainian population while relying on Ukrainian assistance to help rule over Poland. Almost all village leaders in Hrubieszów County were Ukrainian, as were two-thirds in Chełm county. According to Polizeireiterabteilung-III, this power disparity meant "all of the onus is placed on the shoulders of the Polish population."[106] Furthermore, Ukrainian relief committees were given more freedom than their Polish or Jewish counterparts, including to organize the return of Orthodox and Greek Catholic churches which had been expropriated by the Polish state. The ultimate goal of the Ukrainian committees, as pursued by their central chairman Volodymyr Kubiyovych, was the creation of an ethnically pure Ukrainian state that included the eastern Lublin District.[107]

All nascent partisan forces in the region began assassinating individual Ukrainians suspected of collaborating with German authorities. This largely consisted of village administrators and relief committee officials, who presented easier targets than any German, and whose harm brought less repression on the surrounding population. According to a list compiled by the Ukrainian relief committee, nine of their officials were killed by "Polish bands" in Hrubieszów County in 1942; no fatalities were given for Chełm County.[108] These numbers do not include the losses of Ukrainian police, whom the committee alleged to have been attacked with greater ferocity than their Polish counterparts. Based on German records, however, Polish police in the Lublin District suffered thirty-seven killed and twenty-eight wounded in 1942 compared to five killed and one wounded among Ukrainian auxiliaries.[109] In any case, the number of political murders continued to rise. By the summer

103. USHMM, RG-67.014M, Reel 286, H283, File 3, Review of Ukrainian Press, 1008 (Nov. 1, 1942). Historians estimate that 20,000 Ukrainian expatriates came to the General Government from Soviet-occupied Polish territory, many of whom returned to the east after June 1941. Zajączkowski, *Ukraińskie podziemie*, 87–88.

104. Nicholas Terry, *The Trawniki Men: Soviet Prisoners of War and Ukrainian Civilians in the Service of the SS, 1941–1945* (Unpublished Report for the Metropolitan Police, 2011), 63–64, quoting a July 1943 report of UDK activist Iaroslav Dzindra.

105. Ryszard Torzecki, *Polacy i Ukraińcy: sprawa ukraińska w czasie II wojny światowej na terenie II Rzeczypospolitej* (Warsaw, 1993); Robert Ziętek, "Konflikt polsko-ukraiński na Chełmszczyźnie i południowym Podlasiu w okresie okupacji niemieckiej," *Rocznik Chełmski* 7 (2001), 251–89.

106. APL, 514/38, Report of Polizeireiterabteilung-III for 26.10–25.11.1943 (Nov. 23, 1943), 151. This is an exaggeration but reflects an uneven burden that was true.

107. NARA, T992/4, Vol. 11, Hans Frank Diary, 293 (April 18, 1941); Frank Golczewski, "Shades of Grey: Reflections on Jewish-Ukrainian and German-Ukrainian Relations in Galicia," in Ray Brandon and Wendy Lower, eds., *The Shoah in Ukraine: History, Testimony, Memorialization*, eds. (Bloomington, 2010), 114–55.

108. Provincial Archives of Alberta (PAA), Michael Chomiak Papers, 85.191/59, List of Ukrainian activists killed in the Chełm and Podlasie regions (Jan. 22, 1944).

109. USHMM, RG-15.011M, Reel 2, File 33, KdGend Lublin to KdO Lublin (April 22, 1944), 62.

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of 1943, a Peasant Battalion unit ("Rysia") was openly targeting Ukrainians it accused of being "leaders of the campaign against Poland," "known for their bloodthirsty attitude to Poland," and "proven to have carried out murders against Polish citizens."[110]

While the scale of "Polish terror" was growing, the Ukrainian committee chairman in Hrubieszów observed that such attacks "still did not have a mass character" by late 1942.[111] This changed due to the massive deportation action in Zamojszczyzna, which marked a tragic turning point in Polish-Ukrainian relations. Grzegorz Motyka echoed the consensus among Polish historians when he said "the (Zamość) displacement permanently destroyed the peace in the Lublin region."[112] As tens of thousands of Polish residents were forcibly removed from their homes and replaced by Ukrainians and Volksdeutsche through the early months of 1943, there was great anxiety among Poles that they were destined for the same fate as Jews.

Desperately hoping to disrupt further displacements, expelled farmers and partisan groups lashed out in brutal fashion, as those who took over Polish residences were subjected to exceptional degrees of violence. Volksdeutsche settlers were the first to be attacked, including the killing of forty-five ethnic Germans in Cieszyn in late January 1943, but Ukrainian communities were soon targeted as well.[113] A Peasant Battalion unit launched a coordinated raid against the villages of Strzelce and Tuchanie, murdering two dozen residents and setting one hundred farmhouses ablaze. All told, sixty Ukrainian villagers (including eleven women) were killed in the eastern Lublin province throughout the spring of 1943, while hundreds more were left homeless.[114]

After reaching a crescendo in May 1943, anti-Ukrainian violence declined significantly until late August/early September 1943 with the arrival of Polish refugees fleeing massacres by the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) in Volhynia. This triggered popular outbursts of retaliation and precipitated a rapid escalation of violence by both communities. The Polish Home Army and Peasant Battalions engaged in a systemic effort to terrorize the Ukrainian population, while several Ukrainian groups (auxiliary police, village militias, and UPA partisans) "applied their own retaliatory measures against Poles."[115] The partisan Waldemar Lotnik summarized the incessant devastation: "Each time more people were killed, more houses burnt, more women raped."[116] In the village of Prehoryłe, where prewar interethnic relations had been amiable, an UPA unit with several local Ukrainians murdered eleven Poles on

110. Zajączkowski, *Ukraińskie podziemie*, 237ff.

111. PAA, Michael Chomiak Papers, 85.191/59, Commentary on Hrubieszów County.

112. Grzegorz Motyka, *Tak było w Bieszczadach: walki polsko-ukraińskie 1943–1948* (Warsaw, 1999), 136.

113. NARA, T175/73, Krüger to Himmler (Jan. 28, 1943), 2590448.

114. PAA, 85.191/59, List of Ukrainian activists killed in the Chełm and Podlasie regions (Jan. 22, 1944); Commentary on events in Hrubieszów County by UDK-Hrubieszów (Chrusztsch).

115. PAA, 85.191/59, Report on the Situation of the Ukrainian Population in the Lublin District (Dec. 9, 1943).

116. Waldemar Lotnik, *Nine Lives: Ethnic Conflict in the Polish-Ukrainian Borderlands* (London, 1999), 66.

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March 7–8, 1944.[117] The spiral of revenge eventually culminated in the razing of Sahryń and other Ukrainian villages in mid-March 1944, one of the largest crimes perpetrated by the Polish underground in WWII. All told, nearly 2,000 Ukrainians (including 769 women and 348 children) were massacred during this brutal "cleansing action."[118]

Offering a new picture of popular and interethnic violence in occupied Poland, this article has presented a holistic account of the multi-target, multi-perpetrator attacks that broke out across the Chełm region during WWII. All told, dozens of Soviet POWs, hundreds of Jews, and thousands of Poles and Ukrainians died by local hands in the region, largely between 1942 and 1944. The spatial and temporal proximity of these different strands of violence, along with comparable behaviors to different groups, points to the importance of wartime realities as a conditional factor to their occurrence. To a large degree, the perils of Nazi terror had an isolating and corrosive effect on social cohesion, leading people to prioritize their own welfare and survival to an extreme degree, while the pervasive violence from above helped normalize increasingly cruel behavior at the local level. These adverse dynamics, which emerged over time and in response to certain situations, played a foundational role behind the rash of crimes and cruelties within occupied society, and show how they all were related to the same process: the breakdown of neighborly relations and solidarity. As many studies of interethnic violence focus on intergroup factors and group dualities (Polish-Jewish relations, Polish-Ukrainian), this article enriches our understanding of "communal genocide" by highlighting the social context of a wider panorama of violence.

Of course, social and situational factors alone do not fully explain Chełm's unraveling; nationalism and xenophobia also played essential roles. The Home Army reported in September 1943 that many Poles in the Lublin District "stand completely with the politics of the SN (right-wing National Party) and for the complete elimination from public and private life of Jewish survivors and all other national minorities, particularly Ukrainians."[119] While building upon the widespread antisemitism and nationalism of the interwar period, given the meager support in the region for the nationalist platform before 1939, this attitude underscores the ideological radicalization of Polish society. Such ideas sharpened ethnic boundaries and promoted one's own ethnic interests over others', thereby helping fuel nationalist violence during the war.

Group prejudices have a long history in Poland, going back several centuries, but such ideologies are also inflected by their social characteristics and contexts.[120] As existential threats are believed to heighten an individual's

117. USHMM, RG-15.177M, Reel 5, SSKL 143, Testimony of Czesława Mekalska (March 21, 1946), 68.

118. Igor Hałagida, "Ukraińskie straty osobowe w dystrykcie lubelskim (październik 1939–lipiec 1944)–wstępna analiza materiału statystycznego," *Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość* 29, no. 1 (2017): 383–86.

119. APL, 1072/23, Information Dispatch (Sep. 30, 1943), 14.

120. Brian Porter, *When Nationalism Began to Hate: Imagining Modern Politics in Nineteenth Century Poland* (New York, 2000); Cała, *Eternal Enemy*.

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attachment to communal identities, this article sees the upsurge of Polish nationalism during WWII as partly rooted in the same hazardous experiences that likewise promoted social atomization and hyper-individualism.[121] Marcin Zaremba has noted that Polish society was reduced to a kind of "social porridge" during the war, "a mass of family communities with a tribal nature."[122] Indeed, just as the Home Army observed the rise of Polish nationalism, the Wehrmacht found 4,000 volunteers in the eastern Lublin District to harvest the vacant fields of deported Polish farmers in exchange for two kilograms of sugar.[123]

Alongside heightened egoism and ethnocentrism, sordid conditions inaugurated harsher mentalities among the occupied population, redrawing the costs of helping and benefits of harming another human being. As the most hunted and hounded group in the region, Jewish residents proved most vulnerable to this metamorphosis, whereby former friends and helpers could transform into persecutors. Such intimate betrayals, which ranged from robbery to denunciation and even murder, were not limited to the Chełm region but took place throughout Poland.[124] In his foundational essay on wartime Polish-Jewish relations, Emanuel Ringelblum wrote about the despoliation of Poland's Jews by former confidants: "The war had demoralized people who had been honest and decent all their lives; now they appropriated the Jews' possessions unscrupulously."[125]

Growing antisemitism worsened the situation of Jews, but it was not the only cause of their betrayal. In the field of Genocide Studies, a broad consensus exists that one does not need to hate in order to harm someone, as ordinary people are capable of performing extreme violence in pressurized situations.[126] Indeed, recent histories of interethnic violence in Volhynia and the Krakow District have highlighted the varied motivations of Polish and Ukrainian peasants, determining that ethno-nationalism was overshadowed by more immediate responses to fear, opportunism, and coercion.[127] Other

121. On increased communalism: Ervin Staub, *The Roots of Evil: The Origins of Genocide and Other Group Violence* (Cambridge, Eng., 1989); Sudhir Kakar, *The Colors of Violence: Cultural Identities, Religion, and Conflict* (Chicago, 1996). On atomization: Jan Gross, *Polish Society under German Occupation: The Generalgouvernement, 1939–1944* (Princeton, 1979).

122. Marcin Zaremba, "The 'War Syndrome': World War II and Polish Society," in Stefan-Ludwig Hoffman, ed., *Seeking Peace in the Wake of War: Europe, 1943–1947* (Amsterdam, 2015), 62.

123. NARA, T501/217, Report from OFK Lublin (Sep. 21, 1943), 435.

124. Bartov, *Anatomy of Genocide*, 247; Natalia Aleksiun, "Intimate Violence: Jewish Testimonies on Victims and Perpetrators in Eastern Galicia," *Holocaust Studies* 23, no. 1–2 (2017): 17–33; Anna Wylegała, "About "Jewish Things" Jewish Property in Eastern Galicia during World War," *Yad Vashem Studies* 44, no. 2 (2016): 83–119.

125. Emanuel Ringelblum, *Polish-Jewish Relations during the Second World War* (Evanston, 1992), 77.

126. Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York, 2017 [1992]); Scott Straus, *The Order of Genocide: Race, Power, and War in Rwanda* (Ithaca, 2008); Fuji, *Killing Neighbors*.

127. Jared McBride, "Peasants into Perpetrators: The OUN-UPA and the Ethnic Cleansing of Volhynia, 1943–1944," *Slavic Review* 75, no. 3 (September 2016): 630–54; Frydel, "Judenjagd."

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studies of the Balkans and Ukraine have shown how violence creates new social dynamics, representing what one scholar calls a "generative force" that can fuel additional killing.[128] Overall, the aforementioned works highlight the fluid and contingent nature of violence, whereby harmful acts seem dependent upon contextual factors more than individual dispositions. As the sociologist Randall Collins has argued, "It is the features of situations that determine what kinds of violence will or will not happen, and when and how."[129]

To be clear, violence is not inevitable, and recognizing the social causes of violence does not detract from the agency and moral responsibility of local actors. While the fate of Jews in occupied Poland was largely determined by forces outside their control, this was not the case for non-Jews, who had more latitude in their actions and choices. As Jan Gross observed, those who engaged in violence against Jews—and by extension, others—did so on their own free will.[130] Certainly, most of the region's population (200,000+) did *not* commit violence, while the noble few who risked their lives to rescue another person show that alternative pathways existed. But humans are social beings, and their actions are invariably shaped and conditioned by their surroundings, including those who engage in criminal behavior during times of genocide.[131] For Chełm, while the brutalizing effects of Nazi occupation were not absolute, nor did they operate in a strictly linear fashion, they helped lower the threshold for violence, whether individuals were fervent nationalists or not.

Although some particularities set the Chełm region apart from other areas of Poland, this article ultimately reaffirms the importance of microhistory to the study of interethnic violence. Such a granular approach can overcome national stereotypes and categorizations by looking at individual actors and revealing analogous behaviors throughout occupied society.[132] This is especially significant for Polish historiography and collective memory of the war, which has traditionally stressed the righteousness and unity of Polish society. Meanwhile, we still lack a comprehensive study of the black market in the General Government, when poor farmers around Chełm were able to receive "fantasy prices" from hungry city dwellers, while studies of wartime banditry remain taboo in contemporary Poland.[133]

Considering the wide array of effects and human responses to Nazi occupation can provide a more nuanced and comprehensive picture of wartime realities while also working towards a more global understanding of communal

128. Alexander Korb, *Im Schatten des Weltkriegs Massengewalt der Ustaša gegen Serben, Juden und Roma in Kroatien 1941–1945* (Hamburg, 2014); Bergholz, *Violence as a Generative Force;* Schnell, *Räume des Schreckens*.

129. Randall Collins, *Violence: A Micro-Sociological Theory* (Princeton, 2009), 20.

130. Gross, *Neighbors*, 133.

131. Susanne Karstedt, Hollie Byseth Brehm, and Laura Frizzell, "Genocide, Mass Atrocity, and Theories of Crime: Unlocking Criminology's Potential," *Annual Review of Criminology* 4 (2021): 75–97.

132. For criticism of national groupings, Tara Zahra, "Imagined Noncommunities: Indifference as a Category of Analysis," *Slavic Review* 69, no. 1 (Spring 2010), 93–119.

133. APL, 514/38, Report of Polizeireiterabteilung-III (March 24, 1943), 52; Wojciech Lada, *Bandyci z Armii Krajowej* (Krakow, 2018).

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violence. In the present article, this technique reveals a unified history of WWII, where the fates of Jews were interrelated to Nazi terror against Poles and Ukrainians. This whirlwind of violence certainly did not target or impact groups equally, but German policies created a shared reality on the ground where these policies were implemented, powerfully influencing the attitudes and behaviors of those caught within a space of mass atrocity.

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