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Project title: Places, Objects, and Bodies: A Material History of Anti-Nazi Resistance in German-occupied Lithuania (1941-1944)

My PhD project explores the materiality (spaces, objects, bodies) of anti-Nazi resistance in German-occupied Lithuania between 1941 and 1944. Focusing on German-occupied Lithuania, the *Generalbezirk Litauen*, which was administered under the *Reichskommissariat Ostland*, this study departs from the existing historiography on resistance in German occupied Eastern Europe by examining the entanglements of four underground movements: Jewish resistance in the ghettos and partisan camps, Communist partisans, Polish *Armia Krajowa* soldiers, and Lithuanian nationalist resistance.

The dissertation adopts a microhistorical approach and attends to a diverse array of material things, including everyday objects, places of resistance and hiding, and human bodies, to explore the physical and material existence of various resisters that this study examines. The focus on the materiality of resistance – that is to say – on the ways material objects (boots, jackets, food) were used to carry out resistance activities, to enhance one's social status within a resistance group and/or to perform violence, tell us much about the social relations, the role of gender and ethnic hierarchies in the resistance movements.

In her memoir Rachel Margolis, a Jewish partisan from Lithuania, remembers how a pair of worn-out but comfortable boots “saved” her during long marches in the forest:

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“Chaim was suffering: the rough kersey boots, which had overjoyed him at first, had rubbed his feet raw, and he, with others in the group, could not even wind foot cloths around them. The poor guys were walking around like invalids. (They were in torment for a long time, for months. There weren't enough bandages or ointment, and people were exhausted from their constant undernourishment). Jozio's skating boots saved me, the same ones I had begun the journey with. They were broken in and comfortable - I was able to walk in them until the following spring.”¹

The word “boots” is mentioned 34 times in her memoir. Indeed, boots were highly valued by partisans because they protected their feet from injuries and infections that their malnourished bodies were particularly prone to, kept feet warm and dry, and were important objects of exchange.

The significance of footwear was also emphasized by historian and writer Shivaun Woolfson, who interviewed Jewish partisan Fania Brantsovskaya in the 2000s. Brantsovskaya was given a pair of boots by a female unit commissar on her first assignment in the partisan war, which involved destroying German telegraph communication. Given that they belonged to the woman's dead son, the gifted boots held a strong symbolic meaning. Another important social interaction that Brantsovskaya experienced in the partisan unit also included a pair boots: she first met her future husband, Mikhail Brantsovsky, while searching for new boots to replace her uncomfortable footwear.²

Although Margolis and Brantsovskaya received their shoes as gifts, boots and other items were also acquired through the practices of exchange, looting, and trophy-taking. The ways various possessions were manufactured, looted, estheticized, or destroyed, allow historians to examine the everyday life in the resistance, the systems of value to which partisans subscribed, and the relations between partisans and peasants of the surrounding villages. Moreover, if we take the anthropological

¹ Rachel Margolis, *A Partisan in Vilna*, Academic Studies Press, 2010, p. 379.

² Shivaun Woolfson. *Holocaust Legacy in Post-Soviet Lithuania: People, Places and Objects*, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2016, p. 108.

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dictum that objects mean different things to different people seriously, it also means that material things are important sources that reflect people's cultural preferences and political, social, and economic structures within which they exist.

Literary scholar Bożena Schalcross has noted that “the Holocaust, with its agenda of human extermination, promoted a fetishization of objects; the acts of looting, amassing, and sorting gave unprecedented centrality to the fragmented material object-world.”³ In my dissertation, I argue that this observation could be expanded to the context of anti-Nazi resistance. After all, the practices of looting, hiding, and combat also highlight the centrality of material things in resistance activities.

Wartime and postwar diaries, testimonies, and memoirs, such as those of Rachel Margolis, often demonstrate a thorough focus on the material existence in the partisan camps and the corporeality of war, enabling the examination of how objects made it possible to wage anti-Nazi resistance in Lithuania, and what individual and collective stories they narrate.

This dissertation therefore adopts the theories and methods developed by the field of material culture studies. Some recent studies have demonstrated how the focus on material culture can contribute to a better understanding of the practices of social differentiation in the Nazi concentration camps⁴, or to provide valuable insights into victims' experiences through a careful reading of the materiality of Holocaust diaries⁵.

³ Bożena Shallcross, *The Holocaust Object in Polish and Polish-Jewish Culture*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Bloomington University Press, 2001.

⁴ Noah Benninga, “The Bricolage of Death: Jewish Possessions and the Fashioning of the Prisoner Elite in Auschwitz-Birkenau, 1942 – 1945”, in Leora Auslander and Tara Zhra (eds.), *Objects of War: The Material Culture of Conflict and Displacement*, Cornell University Press, 2018.

⁵ Katherine Roseau, “The Diary as Witness to the Holocaust: Materiality, Immediacy, and Mediated Memory”, *Holocaust Studies: A Journal of Culture and History*, Volume 25, Issue 4, 2019: 492-513.

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Historiographies of the Holocaust, resistance and collaboration

Historians usually identify four underground movements that operated in the *Generalbezirk Litauen*, an administrative region of the *Reichskommissariat Ostland*: Jewish resistance in the ghettos and partisan camps, Polish Home Army soldiers, Communist resistance, and Lithuanian nationalist underground. Different in size, ideology, and ethnic make-up, they all perceived the German occupation regime as a shared object of hostility. Polish resistance and Soviet partisans were the main armed underground movements operating in the rural borderland regions of the *Generalbezirk Litauen*. Led from 1943 by the Supreme Committee for the Liberation of Lithuania (*Vyriausiasis Lietuvos išlaisvinimo komitetas*, the VLIK), the Lithuanian nationalist resistance united a broad spectrum of interwar politicians, ranging from ultranationalists to social democrats. Also, the Jews who had initially established anti-fascist organizations in the Vilna (*Fareynikte Partizaner Organizatsye*, FPO) and Kowno (*Antifašistinės kovos organizacija*, AKO) ghettos later joined the Soviet partisans in the forests.

Historiographies on these Jewish, Polish, Lithuanian, and Communist resistance movements had followed separate paths for decades due to the complex web of resistance networks and inaccessible sources. Soviet-era scholarship,⁶ for instance, tended to gloss over individual experiences of war and resistance to provide a master narrative of a “sterile Soviet heroism”.⁷ Although a tremendous number of studies have benefited since the early 1990s from the opening of Eastern European archives, newly available sources have not always led to novel questions and conceptualizations in the scholarship on resistance and collaboration. Paradoxically, in Lithuania and Poland, a part of the new scholarship aiming to write a counter-history to the Soviet master narrative

⁶ See: Povilas Štaras, *Partizaninis judėjimas*. Vilnius: Mintis, 1966, Zigmantas Bridikis, *Partizanų takais*, Vilnius: Valstybinė politinės ir mokslinės literatūros leidykla, 1960.

⁷ Svetlana Alexievitch, *La guerre n'a pas de visage de femme*, Presses de la Renaissance, 2004, p. 22.

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relies on the same methodological approaches as the Soviet-era studies, focusing on history from above, military history and the history of organizations.⁸ Moreover, many post-1990 studies, published in the context of the current memorial conflict in Eastern Europe between Nazism and Stalinism, not only deconstruct Soviet-era accounts about the Communist resistance and show the heavy price paid by local peasant populations during the war, but also tend to equate partisan violence with Nazi violence.⁹

On the other hand, historians of the Holocaust who focus on macro events have been more successful in proposing a solid conceptual framework to explain mass violence and inter-ethnic conflicts in Eastern European borderlands, drawing our attention to the spatial dynamics of violence.¹⁰ Despite the utility of this framework, the field continues to lack a solid understanding of how ethnicity and violence worked in concrete local settings in German-occupied Lithuania.

Aims of the project

While focusing on four resistance groups and Nazi repression against their members, I aim to argue for a truly “integrated history”¹¹ of violence in German-occupied Lithuania that not only

⁸ See: Arūnas Bubnys, *Vokiečių okupuota Lietuva 1941-1944*, Vilnius, 1998, Longin Tomaszewski, *Kronika wilenska 1941-1945*. Warsaw: Oficyna Wydawnicza Pomost, 1992, Piotr Niwinski, *Garnizon konspiracyjny miasta Wilna*. Torun : Adam Marszałek, 1999, Rimantas Zizas, *Sovietiniai partizanai Lietuvoje 1941 – 1944*). Vilnius: Lietuvos istorijos institutas, 2014.

⁹ See : Audronė Janavičienė, “Sovietiniai diversatai Lietuvoje (1941 – 1944)”, *Genocidas ir Rezistencija*, no.1 (2007): 98 – 121.

¹⁰ Alexander V. Prussin, “The Civil Wars in the Soviet Western Borderlands, 1941 – 1945”, in Anton Weiss Wendt (ed.) *Eradicating Differences: The Treatment of Minorities in Nazi-Dominated Europe*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010, pp. 119 – 145, Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*, Basic Books, 2012.

¹¹ Saul Friedländer, “An Integrated History of the Holocaust: Possibilities and Challenges,” in Christian Wiese and Paul Betts (eds.), *Years of Persecution, Years of Extermination Saul Friedlander and the Future of Holocaust Studies*, London: Continuum, 2010, pp. 21 – 29.

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explores violent interactions between different armed groups, but also between the Nazi repressions against partisans and the Holocaust.

Another goal of this study is to provide a palpable history of the day-to-day interactions of people who joined one of the four aforementioned resistance organizations or helped underground. To do so, this dissertation therefore adopts the theories and methods developed by the field of material culture studies. Some recent studies have demonstrated how the focus on material culture can contribute to a better understanding of the practices of social differentiation in the Nazi concentration camps¹², or to provide valuable insights into victims' experiences through a careful reading of the materiality of Holocaust diaries¹³.

Moreover, it has been argued that microhistory entails not only a change of scale but also a change of paradigm by bringing out the elements that otherwise would remain invisible and gives attention to the "categories of actors, the strategies of individuals and small groups."¹⁴ By using a microhistorical lens to explore resistance in the *Generalbezirk Litauen*, this study aims to contribute to the growing scholarship that has recently begun to recover the lived experiences of resistance, the Holocaust, and Nazi repressions.

Research questions, sources, and methodologies

This project is structured around three main themes: spaces, material objects, and corporeality of resistance. The first part considers space in geographical and social terms explores archival sources

¹²Noah Benninga, "The Bricolage of Death: Jewish Possessions and the Fashioning of the Prisoner Elite in Auschwitz-Birkenau, 1942 – 1945", in Leora Auslander and Tara Zhra (eds.), *Objects of War: The Material Culture of Conflict and Displacement*, Cornell University Press, 2018.

¹³Katherine Roseau, "The Diary as Witness to the Holocaust: Materiality, Immediacy, and Mediated Memory", *Holocaust Studies: A Journal of Culture and History*, Volume 25, Issue 4, 2019: 492-513.

¹⁴Claire Zalc and Tal Bruttman, "Introduction", in *Toward a Microhistory of the Holocaust*, Claire Zalc and Tal Bruttman (eds.), New York: Berghan Books, 2016.

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by using spatial data processing tools (GIS) to discuss the relationship between the Nazi structures of repression and the development and dismantling of resistance networks in the cities of Vilna and Kowno. This section has two central questions: how did inter-ethnic solidarities, namely those between Jews and Poles in Vilna, develop in concrete, everyday settings and how did neighborhood and other micro-geographical contexts shape forms of resistance and repression?

Secondly, an important consideration for the approach that this section adopts is the issue of space in the context of what I define in my dissertation as “multidirectional violence” in the rural areas of South-Eastern Lithuania, where most of the Soviet and Polish partisan camps were established between late 1942 and early 1944. Invested by conflicting political projects and nationalist imaginaries, these borderland territories were the epicenter of armed resistance as much as that of Nazi collective repressions, looting, and civilian massacres. How did the practices of looting and violence against Nazi collaborators escalated political and ethnic violence in these territories? How did space, and more precisely, the Nazi understanding of these territories as territories “infested by bandits”, influence repressions against the partisans in Lithuania?¹⁵ What are the similarities between the “cleaning” of “partisan infested-areas” and the hunt for the Jews in those territories between 1942 and 1944? To what extent did the violence against partisans and Jews actually overlap?

The second part of this study examines various material objects, such as boots, weapons, jackets, or food. It explores how material things were acquired, smuggled, used, looted, estheticized, or destroyed by the underground. In particular, it pays thorough attention to the circulation of objects among different resistance groups and how partisans reappropriated trophy weapons and other items taken from the enemy. Lastly, objects also allow us to examine social differentiation in the partisan

¹⁵ Christian Ingraio, *Les chasseurs noir : la brigade Dirlenwanger*, Editions Perin, 2009.

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camps, specifically how, in conditions of scarcity, possession and accumulation of rare material items such as watches or well-fitting leather boots, created an elite class among the partisans in the forests.¹⁶

Objects not only narrate the corporal experiences of pain, torture, and hunger, but they further provide a glimpse into the inner lives and lived experiences of war of their owners. The final part of the dissertation therefore looks at bodily experiences of war and violence. It considers the body as a “material envelope”¹⁷ and a “shared site of human vulnerability”¹⁸, examining torture, hunger, cold and other forms of physical pain. I argue that war and resistance narrowed the differences in the ways men and women of different ethnic and social backgrounds experienced their own corporeality¹⁹. However, some social, sex-based, and ethnic differences remained important factors defining how partisans lived in their bodies. For instance, female partisans experienced their corporeality differently on the level of hygiene and sexuality²⁰ and Jewish resisters in the Soviet partisan camps were often subjected to emasculating ethnic stereotypes.²¹ Examining ethnicities in this project will allow for a deeper examination of several layers that compose the individual experience of war and resistance, while also paying close attention to the often-marginalized voices of women in resistance networks.

My arguments are built on archival documentation from the Lithuanian Central State Archives (*Lietuvos centrinis valstybės archyvas*), the Lithuanian Special State Archives (*Lietuvos Ypatingasis*

¹⁶ Noah Benninga, “The Bricolage of Death: Jewish Possessions and the Fashioning of the Prisoner Elite in Auschwitz-Birkenau, 1942 – 1945”, in Leora Auslander and Tara Zhra (eds.), *Objects of War: The Material Culture of Conflict and Displacement*, Cornell University Press, 2018.

¹⁷ Svetlana Alexievitch, *La guerre n'a pas de visage de femme*, Paris : Presses de la Renaissance, 2004, p. 22.

¹⁸ Judith Butler, « Violence, deuil, politique », *Nouvelles Questions Féministes*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2003, p. 91.

¹⁹ Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996, p. 51.

²⁰ Masha Cerovic, *Les enfants de Staline: la guerre des partisans soviétiques (1941-1944)*, Paris: Editions du Seuil, Paris, 2018, Ruth Leiserowitz, “In the Lithuanian Woods. Jewish and Lithuanian Female Partisans”, in Maren Röger and Ruth Leiserowitz (eds), *Women and Men at War: A Gender Perspective on World War II and Its Aftermath in Central and Eastern Europe*, Osnabrück: Fibre Verlag, 2012, pp. 199–218.

²¹ Daniela Ozacky - Stern, “The Forest as a Synagogue: Upholding Jewish Tradition and Religion in the Partisan Units”, *Tchesopis*, Vilnius: European Humanitarian University, 2020, pp. 152 – 167.

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valstybės archyvas), document collections and printed press (1941-1944) from the Martynas Mažvydas national library of Lithuania, the USHMM archives, the YIVO archives, the *Armia Krajowa* museum in Krakow archives, and my field work in Lithuanian and Polish Holocaust and war-related museums. This diverse and multilingual corpus of sources ranges from material objects from museum collections, administrative reports from the occupation authorities and local civil administration, internal documents from the Soviet partisans, the *Armia Krajowa*, Lithuania nationalist resistance groups, German and Lithuanian police reports, wartime press, photographs, and diaries. Many such primary sources in local languages remain relatively unexplored by scholars, particularly in the English-speaking academic world.

Contribution to Holocaust studies

My project engages with the history and historiography of the Holocaust in multiple ways. First, in terms of historiography, one of the main goals of my dissertation is to transcend the historiographical divisions between the studies on various resistance movements that operated in German-occupied Lithuania and to connect the scholarship on resistance with broader historiographical contexts and theoretical approaches, including Holocaust studies, material culture studies, microhistory, and gender history.

Second, by focusing on the multidirectional violence in German-occupied Lithuania, my project hopes to shed light on the links between various resistance and perpetrator groups and the Holocaust in Lithuania. Historians have traditionally treated the role of Lithuanian police battalions (*Schutzmannschaften-bataillone*) in the Holocaust separately from Lithuanian military collaboration in anti-partisan warfare.²² This dissertation aims to contribute to recent scholarship on the Holocaust in Lithuania by shedding light on the overlap between local Holocaust perpetrators and policemen

²² See: Arūnas Bubnys, *Lietuvių policijos batalionai, 1941 – 1945m.*, Vilnius : LGGRTC, 2017.

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charged with anti-partisan actions. In particular, it focuses on the experiences of Jews who survived the 1941 massacres in the Lithuanian province and sought temporary refuge in the neighboring forests, where they were “hunted” by Lithuanian auxiliary policemen. Available police reports allow to challenge the existing scholarship on Lithuanian police battalions in the Holocaust, which distinguishes between battalions formed in 1941 that regularly participated in the genocide and those formed in 1943 that were primarily used in anti-partisan operations. My research, however, shows that even collaborationist formations formed later in the war and perceived in historiography as exclusively anti-Bolshevik formations took part in the “hunt” for Jewish escapees in the forests.

Lastly, by reading various archival sources, including Jewish postwar testimonies, this project also aims to uncover the particularities of Jewish experiences in the partisan camps. By examining the corporeality of resistance and the inner lives of Jewish partisans through their personal belongings, this dissertation offers great potential to provide a new contribution to the ongoing microhistorical turn in Holocaust history.²³

²³ See: Jan Grabowski, *Hunt for the Jews: Betrayal and Murder in German-Occupied Poland*, Indiana University Press, 2013, Omer Bartov, *Anatomy of a Genocide: The Life and Death of a Town Called Buczacz*. New York, London, Toronto, Sydney: Simon & Schuster, 2018, Natalia Aleksiu, “Gender and the Daily Lives of Jews in Hiding in Eastern Galicia,” *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues*, no. 27 (2014): 38–61.