

The Lucifer Effect Unleashed: Nazis, Poles, and the Holocaust

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January 2022

Case 1

On April 23, 1943, a German police expedition arrived in the village of Podborze. The police received reports that locals were giving shelter to Jews, now fugitives under German law. When they arrived at the home of the suspects, the Dudek family, both the Poles and the Jewish family from the same village that they were sheltering, the Siegfrieds, managed to flee. Both families had been prewar acquaintances. The German police then switched gears to collective punishment of the village. They fired incendiary bullets into the thatched roof of the Dudek household, firing at every second homestead as they proceeded down the road. Though no one was killed that day, the so-called pacification action (*Pazifizierungsaktion*) claimed 23 homesteads, including the home of the village head and the community building, depriving some 150 people of a roof over their heads.

The departure of the German police opened a second chapter of violence. In subsequent days, the Polish 'Blue' Police (*Polnische Polizei*, PP) began responding to reports of Jews being captured by locals in surrounding villages. The most vociferous among them demanded that the policemen kill the captives for fear of being exposed by the Jews when interrogated by the German police, which might lead to a similar fate. In the climate of collective fear, the Polish Police had the potential of functioning as a communal killing squad. Acts of extreme violence revealed a transformative potential on social relations. German state terror functioned as a catalyst in the subsequent expulsion, capture, and murder of Jews in the surrounding area. If placed on a map, this post-repression effect spread to at least 10 surrounding villages within a 15-km radius,

bringing into orbit three Polish Police stations – all in the space of approximately two weeks. Local inhabitants captured as many as 32 fugitive Jews throughout three communes and delivered them into the hands of the local police, who killed most of the captives (Frydel 2016).

Case 2

In the fall of 1943, in the village of Brzezówka, Rozalia Żurek had taken in a young man dressed in civilian clothing, who was asking for food and shelter. She later learned that he was a Soviet prisoner of war (POW), who had escaped from German captivity. As Żurek's husband had been away in Germany as a forced laborer, she let the man stay, and he helped her with the fall harvest and entertained her children. She told her neighbors that that he was her cousin. Yet word got out and members of the night guard, headed by commandant Piotr Zembroń, appeared at her home. The victim, who remains nameless, turned to Zembroń “with a plea to spare his life, as he's a young man, he wants to live and return to his parents, he's a prisoner of war, who explained clearly to the accused that he's from Leningrad, that he took part in fighting the Germans and was wounded.” When this had no effect, he tried to escape, but one of the guards struck him down with an axe, wounding him in the legs. On the following day, the guards then took the fugitive to the nearby PP post in Błazowa.

In the following months, the same village was witness to another violent incident. Aniela Miśtał had also been sheltering, for about a year, another Soviet POW of Russian background, who had jumped off a transport. The village head was aware of this fact. He reported facing pressure from villagers fearing German repression and told Miśtał several times to get rid of the fugitive. Finally, he notified the commandant of the Błazowa PP of the fugitive's presence. The following day, sometime in September 1943, the gendarmerie and PP were dispatched to Miśtał's home.

When the Soviet POW was nowhere to be found, the gendarmerie shot Aniela Miłał, her nine-year-old daughter, and 10-year-old son. The commandant of the Błażowa gendarmerie then ordered the village guard to set the house on fire and to throw their bodies inside.

The ‘Third Stage’ of the Holocaust

The above cases took place in the vicinity of Dębica county (*Kreishauptmannschaft Debica*), located in Kraków District of German-occupied Poland, or what was then the General Government (GG). *Kreis Debica* was one of twelve such counties in Kraków District, and one of 57 counties that comprised the entire GG. It was inhabited by approximately 310,000 inhabitants, some 18,000 (6%) of whom were Jews. The county contained some ethnic Germans, but it was primarily Polish in its ethnic makeup. Elements found in the above stories represent crucial building blocks of a social history of the German occupation in rural Poland. My research project grapples with how to write this history, particularly the question of how to conceptualize the role of local populations in relation to the Shoah in Poland. The study takes up the subject of ordinary people such as the Siegfrieds, the Dudeks, Rozalia Żurek, Aniela Miłał, those designated as village guards, and local policemen, and strives for a language that captures the complex social dynamics that arose in countless rural communities under occupation.

Both scenarios unfolded in the midst of a period that historians now identify as the ‘third phase’ of the Holocaust on Polish lands, sometimes referred to as the *Judenjagd* or ‘hunt for Jews’ (Browning 2006; Grabowski 2013). It refers to the period from mid-1942 to early 1945 when Jews fled German ghetto-clearing operations initiated in the spring of 1942 under Operation Reinhard, the codename for the Nazi program to kill as many as two million of Poland’s Jews, chiefly in the gas chambers of Bełżec, Sobibór, and Treblinka.

The data is drawn primarily from postwar legal proceedings against individuals accused of collaboration on the basis of the Decree of August 31, 1944, issued by the pro-Soviet government. Today, they are housed in the regional branch archives of the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN). These were generally off-limits to researchers during the Polish People's Republic (1944-1989), but historians of the Holocaust have begun to draw on them in the last two decades. It is this trial material that makes a reconstruction of the *Judenjagd* possible in the first place.

A working hypothesis among scholars working in this field is that approximately 10% of the roughly 2.5 million Jews still alive on the eve of ghetto 'liquidations' (or as many as 250,000 fugitive Jews) made the escape to the so-called Aryan side and sought shelter. It is estimated that fewer than 50,000 survived. The question of what happened to the missing cohort of the estimated 200,000 Jewish fugitives represents a *terra incognita* of Polish national memory and a new frontier of Holocaust research (Engelking and Grabowski 2022). My study identifies 1,257 Jews who evaded the mass killing operations and took shelter on the territory of *Kreis* Debica, 25% of whom survived and 75% of whom were subsequently killed, many with the help of the local population (Frydel 2022).

A study of this period tends to hit on a national nerve, because it is understood that ethnic Polish society, somewhat removed from the reaches of German power in rural areas, had a larger say in the fate of the Jews who did not survive in contrast to other stages of the Holocaust. The issue of Polish behavior on this measurable "periphery of the Holocaust" (Gross and Grudzińska-Gross 2012) thus represents the load-bearing question of Polish responsibility.

The current research project is concerned with the transformation of social relations in Poland among ethnic groups during the Second World War, under conditions of duress and in a

period of extreme violence. It seeks to extend Max Bergholz's insights regarding "violence as a generative force" into the context of rural Poland under German occupation (Bergholz 2016). It aims at providing a fine-grained reconstruction of the social dynamics and processes that informed the participation of locals in the persecution of Jews for a period of almost three years. I suggest that a sociologically informed reframing of this period can generate novel insights about violence as a social process. Among others, the project explores the following questions:

- What social processes enabled the production of sustained violence against Jews and other groups in the Polish countryside for a period of almost three years?
- Is it possible to write a bystander-centered account of the Holocaust?
- What are the relevant contexts into which the history of the Holocaust in Poland should be integrated and how does its integration change our understanding of this history?
- Should we study the persecution of the Jews in Poland separately or rather as closely integrated into the German system of terror, and therefore together with the oppression of non-Jewish Poles and other persecuted groups?
- How do historians respond to the challenge of writing about social processes that have conventionally been relegated to social scientists?

Toward an Integrated *Micro*history of the Holocaust

The question of how to conceptualize the role of local populations in relation to the Holocaust in the 'Bloodlands' of Eastern Europe (Snyder 2010) remains a challenge. In the territories of the former Second Polish Republic (1918-1939) that found themselves within the larger German *Lebensraum*, the Holocaust was superimposed on distinct policies targeted at other groups within

the indigenous population. Historians who seek to follow Saul Friedländer's approach of an 'integrated history' of the Holocaust (Friedländer 2010) can therefore ask: How does one write an 'integrated history' of the Holocaust on the scale of a microhistory in the lands of Eastern Europe? In other words: Do both cases, noted at the outset, belong in the same bottom-up history of the 'third phase' of the Holocaust in Polish lands?

My answer to the last question is an unambiguous *yes*. The cases signal the existence of an important context in need of full exposition. The inclusion of cases that deal with the persecution of other groups by essentially the same group of actors, makes all the difference if we are seeking a better understanding of perpetrators and bystander societies. They raise the curtain to give a glimpse of some of the social dynamics, mechanisms, and pressures that shaped the 'third stage' of the Holocaust. The cases show, for example, that a single village often contained layers of violence that conditioned patterns of anticipatory behavior, rendered invisible by historians who only indexed cases of anti-Jewish persecution. As the above cases suggest, persecution occurred along various intersecting axes. Manhunts for Jews ran parallel for similar manhunts and searches for other fugitive groups, here, most prominently Soviet POWs, but also Roma and Poles slated for forced labor in Germany. In moments of existential crises that gripped villages, Polish self-preservation could find itself in a conflict with Jewish survival strategies. All actors moved in an atmosphere thick with terror, uncertainty, rumor, suspicion of neighbors, and fear of German informers.

The study is an attempt to address certain problems in the historiography, foremost the challenge of integration. Scholars such as Raz Segal have pointed to Friedländer's own writing "integrating rather selectively." Segal sees the Holocaust as "a nexus of multidimensional processes of mass violence" and recommends that historical analysis keep a close eye on "the

connecting threads” and the “*links* between the layers of violence against different groups rather than the more common tendency to think about the fate of the Jews in comparison to that of another group” (Segal 2016). Likewise, Daniel Brewing sees the Holocaust-centrism of German scholarship on the occupation of Poland as leading to a reductive presentation of Polish civilians. As a corrective, he suggests that historians consider “the multiple connections between different directions of terror” (Brewing 2018).

A related historiographical weakness pertains to bystander studies, which remains relatively undeveloped, certainly at a theoretical level. As currently practiced, it tends to subordinate the non-Jewish experience almost entirely to the Holocaust. The Hilbergian term itself has been subjected to criticism, as the ‘bystander,’ with its implicit moral connotations, is more an accusatory than an analytical category (Fulbrook 2019). Yet what makes the study of bystanders so fascinating are the ambiguities and contradictions that the Holocaust elicited, as individuals could occupy multiple positions of perpetrator, victim, and bystander.

The publication of Jan Gross’s book *Neighbors*, a microhistory of the Jedwabne pogrom (Gross 2001), seems to have largely displaced the ‘bystander’ with the category of ‘neighbors.’ Yet the study of the genocide of neighbors, which has virtually become a subcategory of mass violence studies, is not without its share of challenges. Chief among them is the analytical emptiness of the term ‘neighbor’ in a part of the world where the population of a village could range anywhere from several hundred to several thousand. The term ‘neighbors’ bears little meaning, except as a floating signifier for the non-Jewish population as a whole.

A third area of historiographical interest that the project seeks to address is the methodology of microhistory. Microhistory has excelled as a vehicle for uncovering untold narratives, especially ones dealing with the ‘difficult’ past. The deconstruction of apologetic

national myths surrounding Poland and the Holocaust has been one of the hallmarks of the genre (Gross 2001; Grabowski 2013). Microhistory showcased a previously underappreciated level of individual and communal agency vis-à-vis the Holocaust. At the same time, the shift from a “totalitarian framework” of a previous era has led to the marginalization of “structural significance” and “agency inflation,” which opened the way to a “moralizing framework in which the structural power of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union is marginalized” (Snyder 2011).

In other words, the historical discourse in bystander studies sometimes creates the impression that locals had total choice. Unsurprisingly, in local studies, the real masters of life and death, the Germans, remain essentially offstage. Yet, in Snyder’s view, “a coherent account of structural power must precede any factual or moral account of the possibilities for individual choice” (Snyder 2011). In the absence of such an account, he sees the use of “East European antisemitism” as a “narrative glue that holds together shaky explanations of the Holocaust” (Snyder 2013). Taken together, these factors have aided the tendency to see the subject in Manichean terms. A more mundane challenge haunting microhistorical writing is how to avoid the trap of positivism or encyclopedism and find balance between the general and the particular. What is the best method for a historian to follow the trajectories of individuals and situate them into bigger patterns and social dynamics?

A recognition of the above state of affairs and challenges leads us back to the first question: How to write an ‘integrated’ microhistory of the Holocaust in the European ‘Bloodlands’? In the current project, I attempt to develop such an approach in the following steps. First, I contextualize the shelter and manhunts for fugitive Jews with parallel processes aimed at other fugitive groups, such as Soviet POWs. Second, I situate the actions of the perpetrators within a broad system of surveillance operations that conditioned local societies in obedience to German law, as well as the

general breakdown in norms and social relations. The *Judenjagd* must be considered in relation to the specific spatial-temporal circumstances in which it took place. Third, I suggest the German occupation gave rise to two different trajectories of experience between Poles and Jews. This competition, in turn, helps us to understand the specific dynamics of grassroots violence. Fourth, I draw attention to the cohort of perpetrators who participated in both harming Jews and helping them (Frydel 2017).

The aim of this combined approach is to broaden the interpretive horizon and to contribute to a more robust social history, one in which these highlighted elements are shown to have had some causal effect on the course of events on the ground. In concrete terms, it translates to a foregrounding of certain layers of the historical context. By widening the source base to observe the behavior of locals within the broader dilemmas faced by rural societies, we can begin to perceive a variety of links between patterns of violence, a causal interplay between targeted groups, and the long afterlife of violence – all of which had an impact on the course of the events on the ground. I believe a thick description of this multivariate reality might bring us closer to a social history of this period.

The *Judenjagd* and the Sociology of State Collapse

Much of the scholarship dealing with the *Judenjagd* remains virtually untouched by an interdisciplinary approach. The project's novelty lies not in merely exposing Polish participation in aspects of the Holocaust, which it regards as a given, but rather in seeking to marry a historical study with the social science literature on extreme violence and mass atrocity. The application of two concepts drawn from the social sciences might help to better understand the variety of behaviors that such an integrative perspective brings to light.

The first is to identify roles such as village heads, village guards, firemen, hostages, and local police forces as constituting a village security system, which represented the critical ‘meso-level’ of the process of genocide in the General Government (Finkel and Straus 2012). Such an approach highlights the importance of institutions, as it was the institutional role that largely determined the range of behavior, not a shared ideological profile. The meso-level baseline gives us a more precise understanding of the participants and would-be participants in persecution and violence as opposed to the established strictures of perpetrators, victims, and bystanders, which lack analytical value on the local level. The study therefore offers an opportunity to rethink and clarify the role of ideology in mass atrocity, as overarching theoretical accounts of the role of ideology remain limited and problematic (Maynard 2014). It also allows us to restore some of the insights of Hannah Arendt regarding the workings of ‘totalitarian’ systems and their ability to co-opt individuals.

The second approach views local dynamics through the prism of a ‘security dilemma’ under conditions resembling state collapse or state breakdown, which followed the dismantling of the Second Polish Republic (Kasfir 2007). State failure can trigger security dilemmas and violent predation. Broadly speaking, in such a social dynamic individuals must cope with the threat or occurrence of violence without help from a neutral authority. Individuals not only lose the protection normally supplied by the state but are also freed from institutional restraints. A security dilemma requires a responsive relationship. Escape from a security dilemma is the main reason why someone acts. Their motives become more complex than when they could depend on the state. Actors in failed states are likely to have both security and predatory motives much of the time. The first concerns the search for safety, the second involves the attempt to acquire material gain. Groups that once lived together because they could depend on the state to protect them will

suddenly become wary of one another. Informal norms, ties of friendship, and obligations to neighbors are cast aside. In the dynamics of a security dilemma, situation-based identities are layered on top of inherited group traits.

The overarching context for local interaction was a sociology characteristic of state collapse ushered in by the Third Reich's destruction of the Polish state. Under German occupation, everyday encounters were reframed in the shadow of various security dilemmas. The aftermath of military defeat, the loss of sovereignty, the lifting of legal protection from occupied society, the imminence of German terror, the imposition of the doctrine of collective responsibility, the weaponization of ethnic or national identity, and the rise of banditry all led to the formation of ongoing security dilemmas. Often, where Poles saw fear, Jews saw greed as the primary motive. Antisemitism is shown to have rarely been the sole motive for participation, but usually functioned in combination with other motivations.

This approach has important advantages. First, situating the question of Polish agency within these social dynamics and meso-level structures and has the potential of transcending national or ethnic frameworks and integrating the observed phenomena under a single analytical umbrella. Second, it helps to foreground the fact that the German occupation was from its inception a period of fear and mass terror, of lesser or greater suffering for all of occupied Polish society. In essence, the German occupation had unleashed a kind of 'Lucifer Effect' (Zimbardo 2007) on Poland's multiethnic society, one in which everyday processes were catalyzed in a pressurized context of war, social breakdown, and weaponized identities. The General Government was a place where human cruelty flourished, perpetrators functioned under extraordinary conditions of impunity, and individuals had to cope with the threat or occurrence of violence without help from

a neutral authority. The *Judenjagd* represented one vector driving the fragmentation of Poland's prewar multiethnic society.

It is hoped that this research will contribute to a scholarship that is neither accusatory nor defensive nor simplistic in outlining motives for action and inaction among locals in the face of the Shoah.

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