
THE HOLOCAUST IN UKRAINE

Selected articles from
Holocaust and Genocide Studies

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MEMORIAL
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MUSEUM**

JACK, JOSEPH AND MORTON MANDEL
CENTER FOR ADVANCED HOLOCAUST STUDIES

Introduction

Wendy Lower

Once again Ukraine finds itself in a state of revolution and war. Russian invasion and the internecine struggles of pro-Russian separatists and Ukrainian nationalists threaten Ukraine's independence and eat away at its borders. The outcome may affect all Europe and the United States. 5

The warring parties have something in common: Ukraine's past. The conflict over who controls Ukraine's future is also a conflict over its history. Propaganda posters in Kiev's Maidan Square, billboards across the country, and television coverage on Ukrainian and Russian networks use the inflammatory images of Nazism, Hitler, and the Holocaust to assert their divergent claims. Ukrainian nationalists are portrayed as "Nazi fascists," and Russian separatists are scorned as followers of a Hitler-moustached Putin. Antisemitic cartoons and provocations are weapons in this propaganda war. The Jewish minority has been forced into a precarious position between Russians and Ukrainians, pressed to make a choice between Moscow and Kiev. In April 2014, in a highly publicized open letter, the most prominent Jews—representing more than 250 Jewish organizations in Ukraine—opted for Kiev, calling for a united Ukraine and criticizing Putin's antisemitic wedge tactics. Then, in what seemed to be a Russian retaliation, an antisemitic flyer in Donetsk demanded the registration of Jews, igniting further outrage and international media attention, and prompting the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum to issue a statement of concern. 10 15 20

With the intent of informing, and perhaps narrowing this gap between historical facts and inflammatory rhetoric, the editors of *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* (published by Oxford University Press in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum) decided to issue this special edition on the Holocaust in Ukraine, featuring selected essays that were published in the journal in the past ten years. This effort coincides with the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies' continuing initiative to shed needed light on the Holocaust in the occupied territories of the former Soviet Union. These essays offer a critical, empirically based presentation of key aspects of Ukraine's Holocaust history: the role of local German occupiers as perpetrators of the "Final Solution"; the fate of Jews who died and survived; the impact of a Jewish camp memorial on a local community; and the history of Ukrainian collaborators. Though each concentrates on a particular region, city, or town, read as a whole they begin to fill in the bigger picture of the history of Holocaust in Ukraine and the Nazi occupation.¹ 25 30 35

On the eve of the Nazi invasion in June 1941, Ukraine (today's borders) was home to the largest Jewish population in Europe. While a significant number evacuated as the German army and its allies pushed eastward, fewer than 2% of those who stayed survived the Nazi occupation. 40

Until the early 1990s—that is, before the Iron Curtain fell—we simply did not know the scale of wartime destruction there. Holocaust historiography pioneers Philip Friedman and Raul Hilberg surmised that about 900,000 Jews were killed in Ukraine. In the late 1990s, scholars including Dieter Pohl estimated 1.2 million Jews; now the number has increased to 1.5–1.6 million. These numbers are the individual lives that the Germans deliberately concealed in their reports or did not bother to record. Among them are the Jewish men, women, and children who sought refuge in Ukraine's western forests only to be murdered by Polish, Ukrainian, and Soviet partisans during the Nazi retreat. Thus, there were many perpetrators, albeit with different political agendas, who killed Jews and suppressed this history. As of 1943, published Soviet accounts subsumed the Jewish death toll under the general category of all "peaceful citizens who perished."² Few Jewish eyewitnesses were alive to provide detailed accounts of what happened (although their testimony was collected by Ilya Ehrenburg and others, it was buried in the banned *Black Book*).³ The many indigent 55
collaborators just wished that the history would go away. Other eyewitnesses were not encouraged to speak about what they saw happen to their Jewish neighbors, or chose not to speak for a number of reasons.

The collapse of the Soviet Union broke this silence. It opened up the archives and access to the mass murder sites, attracting Western scholars such as those featured in these essays. It allowed for the flow of information out of Ukraine, including from Ukrainian and Russian historians presented here. In post-Soviet Ukraine, the Great Patriotic War was refashioned into a national liberation struggle, a politically motivated historiographical shift that aimed to establish Ukraine's national sovereignty and legitimacy. Efforts to refashion the Holocaust became politicized in a new way. 60
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Since Ukraine became an independent nation in August 1991, leaders in Kiev have been trying to unify the country through policies of Ukrainization—enforcing the teaching of Ukrainian language, constructing memorials, and rewriting textbooks with an emphasis on the common suffering in the Holodomor, the Great Famine of 1932–33, and a shared struggle against Stalinism and Nazism. While the crimes of the Stalin era offered a clear rallying point (which also often contained antisemitic assumptions that Jews dominated the NKVD, Stalin's intelligence and terror apparatus), the horrors of the Second World War and the Holocaust proved more difficult to reconcile, and became the source of ethnic and political divisions that are evident today. In January 2010, outgoing President of Ukraine Viktor Yushchenko (the Western-orientated leader of the 2004 Orange Revolution) posthumously awarded Stepan Bandera the title of Hero of Ukraine. Bandera, the former fascist leader of the radical faction of the World War II era's Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, is one 70
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of the most controversial figures in Ukraine's modern history. A few months later this title was revoked by his pro-Russian successor, President Viktor Yanukovich, who was 80 ousted in the 2014 revolution. In recent years the polarization has increased and created a climate hostile to any critical, academic discussion of the history of wartime collaboration. Leading Western scholars, including John Paul Himka, Frank Golczewski, and Per Rudling, who uncovered archival documentation on the pogroms in Lviv and about atrocities committed against Poles and Jews by the Organization of 85 Ukrainian Nationalists and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, were scorned at public events in Kiev and discouraged from lecturing in Ukraine. In the 1990s access to World War II records archived in Ukraine had been among the very best of the post-Soviet states. But such access had become more difficult, not only because records such as those on Ukrainians who served as guards in the gassing centers 90 (Trawniki men) were reclassified, but also because of widespread corruption in the government, including in the archival administration.

Writing the history of the Holocaust in Ukraine has been and probably will continue to be a very complicated, even politically perilous endeavor. For one, historians are dealing with a country that long was divided into regions subject to various imperial 95 influences: Russian, Polish, Austro-Hungarian, Soviet, and Nazi. Jews in Ukraine experienced the Second World War under Soviet, German, Hungarian, and Romanian occupation. As historian Ray Brandon has stressed, the Jewish inhabitants of Ukraine did not form a cohesive Jewish community. Nor did the Jews of Ukraine form a culturally Ukrainian Jewry. The Jews of Ukraine were greatly influenced by whichever 100 legitimate or occupying regime they found themselves subject to. Most fell under direct Nazi rule in territories under military and civilian administration. Despite the size of Ukraine's Jewish population, academics and laypersons alike have for more than two generations tended to talk about the Holocaust in the Soviet Union, Poland, Romania, or Hungary, but not about the Holocaust in Ukraine. In Ukraine today, one 105 often hears about the Holocaust *and* Ukraine, with reference to Babi Yar and Auschwitz, but not to the local communities and individuals who collaborated in the genocide.

The articles featured here encompass the major historiographical developments in Holocaust research over the past decades. Among the trends in early post-Soviet 110 research were regional studies that reconstructed the dynamic radicalization of Nazi anti-Jewish policy as the result of the interaction of central leaders in Berlin and local occupiers in Ukraine, and elsewhere in the Nazi East. Historians, mostly trained by specialists on Nazi Germany, relied on captured German documents, thereby stressing the roles and actions of the occupiers. My article epitomizes this trend as I argue 115 that German leaders pressured local leaders to make their regions "*judenfrei*," particularly in the region of Zhytomyr, where Hitler and Himmler established their field headquarters and had a direct role in the timing and intensity of the killing actions. While touring the Eastern Territories, Himmler advised his men to follow his

example, to “take care of matters on the spot . . . [and] make decisions in the field.” 120
The spatial divide between Berlin and Berdichev was not so vast.

Furthermore, most local leaders did not need the pressure of higher-ups to ruthlessly carry out the killings. They obediently anticipated the wishes of their superiors, and demonstrated initiative and resourcefulness in carrying out the mass murder of more than 170,000 Jews of the General Commissariat Zhytomyr. Alexander Prusin 125
also finds that, for the most part, German regional officials cooperated with one another in carrying out the “Final Solution.” The cohesion among men of the Sipo-SD office in Generalbezirk Kiev constituted what Prusin terms a “community of violence.” In addition to captured German records from Kiev, Prusin researched Soviet Extraordinary Commission reports and postwar West German trials; he also interviewed eyewitnesses in Ukraine, including two former Ukrainian policemen. 130

The community that Prusin reconstructs contained various perpetrator types. They were political soldiers molded by Himmler’s SS-police program, but of disparate personalities: “dedicated zealots,” “ordinary men,” “cold-hearted careerists” and “individuals who experienced discomfort at performing their tasks.” The core personnel in 135
the office came from Einsatzkommando 5, a subunit of Einsatzgruppe C, and numbered approximately 90 staff members posted in Kiev, Bila Tserkva, Uman, Poltava and Lubny. They were supported by about 70 local interpreters and drivers, and scores of native informants from all segments of society. Prusin found that about 90% of those hauled into the region’s torture chambers were neither Jews nor members of 140
the resistance, but rather ordinary Soviet citizens caught up in German raids such as mass reprisal actions and labor drives. Even though some members of the Sipo-SD office were reluctant and even raised objections to the mass murder of civilians, they “perceived themselves as a single community designed or fated to maintain order by violence in the Generalbezirk Kiev.” (22) 145

In the 1990s, Western scholars and doctoral students gained access to Ukrainian archives in Kiev, Zhytomyr, Lviv, and elsewhere, a change that spurred the writing of regional studies. They also obtained access to the mass murder sites, to memorials, and to the dwindling population of Jewish survivors. This development explains the origins of Rebecca Golbert’s doctoral research on Pechora. 150

Golbert explored Ukraine’s terrain as a memorial landscape where Jewish Ukrainians have provided many, often conflicting, testimonies. As a social anthropologist fluent in Russian, Golbert combined her empirical field work in Ukraine with theoretical approaches to identity formation and memory. She asks, “How do present-day memorial objects and practices—including stone structures, ritual commemorations, 155
and personal and communal narratives—shape public and private memory, and how do they interact discursively (and nondiscursively) with historical narratives built on archival research?” In a close reading of the testimony that she collected, Golbert teases out the disconnects between what actually happened and the misperceptions of those who describe what they think happened, finding inherent value “in exploring the 160

complex ways in which people remember and relate to their pasts.” Pechora’s survivors presented their stories to meet “perceived” outside demands, most often tied to compensation schemes, such as applications to the Claims Conference. They discussed and debated whether Pechora was a camp or a ghetto, a defining category for compensation eligibility. Out of this emerged a common narrative on the history of the camp. Recurring scenes emerged among the testimonies, such as the story of a Bessarabian Jew smuggling cherries over the camp wall. He reportedly was shot dead by a Ukrainian policeman and remained hanging on the wall for days. Golbert found that a younger generation of non-survivors including local Ukrainians adopted this and other stories as their own.

The common local narratives that emerge are simplifying the past. Pechora, like other Holocaust sites, carries its own unique history as an incarceration site that cannot be neatly categorized as a camp or as a ghetto. The conflicting accounts given by survivors remind us that the Jews as a whole were victims of the Holocaust, but that each person experienced the genocidal onslaught differently.

More recently, archival research has shifted from predominantly German documentation of the type found in my earlier account to that from the Soviet postwar investigations and trials that targeted hundreds of thousands of ordinary Soviet citizens suspected of being “traitors to the homeland.” On the basis of these collections of former KGB archives, Yuri Radchenko and Lev Simkin have been able to write legal histories of Holocaust-related trials and studies of the defendants as collaborators.

The precise number of trials conducted in the USSR as a result of Soviet investigations remains unknown, but the figure is certainly in the hundreds of thousands. As Simkin points out, in “no other country did the prosecution of Holocaust perpetrators approach such a scale.” There are many studies to be written from this treasure trove of documentation on collaborators, which includes testimony analysis, notes on the defense strategies of perpetrators, and biographies of defendants, witnesses, interrogators, and other trial participants—among them journalists and filmmakers who covered the highly publicized cases. The investigations are key to writing local histories that integrate victims, perpetrators, and bystanders.

Simkin is among the first to study the Soviet suspension of the standard legal principle of *lex prospicit, non respicit* (the law looks forward, not back) in a 1962 case against twelve previously convicted Nazi collaborators. Though the death penalty was not supposed to be applied in this case because the crimes had occurred more than fifteen years prior to the trial, Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev signed a resolution that allowed it. Simkin discovered this resolution among thousands of pages in the KGB records in the archival collections of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. According to Simkin, this document challenges typical Western (Cold War) views of Soviet legal practices as arbitrary or superficially socialist. Instead, it demonstrates a very serious pursuit of war criminals. The convicted were Soviet POWs recruited by the SS to serve as guards at Treblinka and Sobibor. The collaborators confessed to

unloading the victims and beating them as they forced them into the gas chambers. Some admitted to having shot victims. Such confessions rarely occurred in the investigations conducted by Western European courts, and this fact leads one to question their reliability as well as the practices of Soviet interrogators and prosecutors. 205

Simkin surmises that “the accused admitted their guilt more readily because they knew that under the law they were threatened with no more than fifteen years of imprisonment.” Or perhaps they misjudged the climate, relying on the 1955 Soviet decree “On the Amnesty of Soviet Citizens Who Collaborated with the Occupiers in the Period of the Great Fatherland War, 1941–1945.” Simkin is not sure whether the Soviet reapplication of the death penalty occurred in many other cases, or whether this 1962 trial was more the exception than the rule in Soviet legal history vis-à-vis collaborators. 210

Until more comparative work is done on the trials, Simkin’s conclusions about Soviet legal practices and reforms remain tentative. However, his case study, like other trial histories, provides significant information for Holocaust historians. Research on the Ukrainian guards who were trained at Trawniki and worked at the gassing centers has not considered the role of the Soviet application of the death penalty and the statute of limitations on World War II-era crimes of collaboration. Furthermore, as perpetrators, the defendants in Simkin’s case resemble the better-known Ivan Demjanjuk, a former guard at Sobibor who was investigated and tried outside the Soviet Union and did not confess to committing crimes. 215
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The predominant image of the Holocaust collaborator has been the uniformed, non-German camp guard or policeman, usually labeled as Ukrainian. For decades Ukrainians have been singled out in Western popular depictions—for instance in the controversial 1994 television broadcast *The Ugly Face of Freedom*—much to the ire of the Ukrainian diaspora then, and of Ukrainian nation-state builders today. Yet Radchenko’s essay shows us that collaboration took many forms and had many faces. More ubiquitous than the guards was the widespread involvement of local government officials and their ex-officio networks. A professor at Kharkiv National University, Radchenko takes a closer look at his own city’s history. He finds that “during the Germans’ census of December 1941, local officials in Kharkiv played a crucial role in identifying Jews, evicting them from their apartments, and forcing them into a temporary ghetto in the barracks of the Kharkiv Machine-Tool Factory and the Kharkiv Tractor Factory.” Across the city there was some variation in scales of participation, with the tenth district council proving especially zealous in looting and ghettoizing Jews and subsequently hunting for escapees or those in hiding, as well as in the murder of Jews and disposal of their bodies. 225
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Thus while earlier histories dealing with regional German leaders established that they took significant initiative in starting and overseeing the “Final Solution” against Jews residing in their districts, these more recent studies, led by Ukrainian and Russian historians, demonstrate that Ukrainians, while themselves living with the threat of Nazi terror either on the streets of Kiev or Kharkiv, or as POWs, were easily 240

recruited to assist the Germans in persecuting, robbing, and even killing Jews. A significant number, more than had been realized before, did so with the greed, hatred, and determination of their German overseers.

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Should we expect people placed in a crisis of war and occupation to behave empathetically, peacefully, indeed ethically? As John Paul Himka observed, the Nazi occupation (coming in the wake of the worst years of Stalinism in Ukraine) allowed otherwise marginal elements, including thugs and criminals, to come to the fore. Rather than condemn all Ukrainian nationalists as fascist collaborators, as is done in recent propaganda, Simkin and Radchenko, while not diminishing the broader influence of a virulent anti-Jewish attitude that was not uniquely Ukrainian, identify more accurately the powerful minority who participated directly. Neither essay on perpetrators and accomplices in the camps and municipal administration determined that nationalist or fascist ideological allegiances were the primary cause of anti-Jewish violence and collaboration.

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Only with more research will we learn whether, as many Jewish survivors testified after the war, in the hierarchy of perpetrators the Ukrainians were among the worst. The current climate in Ukraine has had the effect of suppressing or obfuscating this history. But Radchenko's essay, and indeed the others featured here, speak directly to the issue of a coordinated German and non-German involvement, inside and outside the Nazi administration. They examine perpetrators' involvement in discrete tasks of persecution inflicted against individual Jews. Each victim had his or her own story of suffering, death, or survival, but the wholesale slaughter amounted to the complete erasure of Jewish life, and with it nearly the history of Jews in Ukraine. As Radchenko concludes, "without the participation of local government workers, who knew their localities intimately, who spoke the local languages, and who frequently had been the neighbors of the Jews, the Nazis could not have carried out the genocide so successfully."

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Notes

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1. Karel C. Berkhoff, "The 'Russian' Prisoners of War in Nazi-Ruled Ukraine as Victims of Genocidal Massacre," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 15, no. 1 (2001): 1–32; Elena Ivanova, "Ukrainian High School Students' Understanding of the Holocaust," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 18, no. 3 (2004): 402–20; Vadim Altskan, "On the Other Side of the River: Dr. Adolph Herschmann and the Zhmerinka Ghetto, 1941–1944," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 26, no. 1 (2012): 2–28. Eric C. Steinhart, "The Chameleon of Trawniki: Jack Reimer, Soviet *Volksdeutsche*, and the Holocaust," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 23, no. 2 (2009): 239–62; Mikhail I. Tyaglyy, "The Role of Antisemitic Doctrine in German Propaganda in the Crimea, 1941–1944," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 18, no. 3 (2004): 421–59. George Eisen and Tamás Stark "The 1941 Galician Deportation and the Kamenets-Podolsk Massacre: A Prologue to the Hungarian Holocaust," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 27, no. 2 (2013): 207–41; Dennis Deletant, "Ghetto Experience in Golta, Transnistria, 1942–1944," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 18, no. 1 (2004): 1–26; Mikhail Tyaglyy, "Were the 'Chingené' Victims of the Holocaust? Nazi Policy toward the Crimean Roma, 1941–1944," *Holocaust and Genocide*

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Studies 23, no. 1 (2009): 26–53; Rachel Feldhay Brenner, “Voices from Destruction: Two Eyewitness Testimonies from the Stanisławów Ghetto,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 22, no. 2 (2008): 320–39. 285

2. As of summer 1941 Soviet intelligence about atrocities against Jews in Ukraine was substantial, however the uniqueness of the Nazi genocide targeting Jews and Roma was obscured in official reports from Moscow during and after the war. See Karel C. Berkhoff’s “Total Annihilation of the Jewish Population: The Holocaust in the Soviet Media, 1941–1945,” in *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 10, no. 1 (2009): 61–105. Also see Yitzhak Arad’s Epilogue, “The Holocaust and Soviet Governing Authorities,” in *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 532–44. 290

3. On the story of Ehrenburg’s collection of testimony and its censorship, suppression, and eventual publication, see Joshua Rubenstein and Ilya Altman, eds. *The Unknown Black Book: The Holocaust in the German-Occupied Soviet Territories* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2008). 295