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Local Collaboration in the Execution of the “Final Solution” in Nazi-Occupied Belorussia

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In many cases, especially in the Nazi-occupied Soviet territories, the “Final Solution of the Jewish Question” unfolded before the eyes of the non-Jewish local residents. One can and should ask about the role that such witnesses played in this process. The sheer extent of the killing may lead us to the conclusion that local collaboration was indeed an important aspect of the Holocaust and that the role played by the local non-Jewish populations was more than that of mere extras or bystanders. In this article, the author focuses on the case of Belorussia, analyzing various forms of participation as well as the motives for collaboration in the genocide.

One oversimplified picture of the Holocaust portrays Germans as the sole executioners and Jews as the only victims. But was the Holocaust in fact, as Goldhagen put it some time ago, a purely “German undertaking”? Were local non-Jews merely “bystanders,” or did they play a more active role in the extermination of people who only a short time earlier had been their neighbors, acquaintances, business partners, or even family members? That the German authorities were the instigators of the “Final Solution of the Jewish Question” is clear. The German historian Gert Robel states that “both the legal and the moral responsibility for the murder of the Jewish citizens of the Soviet Union are exclusively on the German side.” However, the sheer number of victims suggests that the Germans alone, without relying upon local assistance in every occupied country, could not have accomplished murder on such a scale.

Jan Tomasz Gross’s 2001 study Neighbors, which dealt with the massacre of the Jews of Jedwabne by their Polish neighbors, highlighted the issue of local collaboration. For many years, Poles had presented this massacre as a purely German crime. Gross’s book led to a reevaluation of the theme of the inter-ethnic relations within Polish society—a reevaluation that expressed itself for example in Polish President Aleksander Kwaśniewski’s public apology to the Jewish people on behalf of the government. In other East European countries, however, such an extensive reevaluation has been somewhat slower in coming, although leaders of the “successor states” of the former Soviet Union, such as Lithuania, Latvia, and Ukraine, have expressed in official declarations their deep regret for the local non-Jewish populations’ role in the Holocaust.
In the scholarship on the Holocaust in Belorussia, two opposing opinions can be discerned. On the one hand, the murder of Belorussian Jews has been portrayed as, by and large, a German matter. Thus Nikolas Vakar, an American historian of Belorussian origin, wrote in 1956:

Disheartened and appalled, the common people assumed the position, outwardly at least, that the Jewish problem was a German one, and not their concern. With all their compassion for the victims, how indeed could they help? On the other hand, a few nationalists collaborating with the occupants had overtly taken the German stand. They joined hands with the Nazis in the persecution—sometimes in the execution, as at Borisov—of the Jew as if hastily to cement with his blood their position of henchmen.

John Loftus, who in the 1980s served as a federal prosecutor in the Office of Special Investigations (OSI) of the Criminal Division of the U.S. Justice Department, made a radically different statement. According to Loftus, “the Holocaust in Byelorussia was unique. In no other nation under German occupation did the inhabitants so willingly and enthusiastically visit such a degree of inhumanity upon their neighbors.”

In this article, I attempt to assess critically these two points of view and to develop an intermediate position.

Few countries under Nazi occupation were as hard-hit as Belorussia. According to various data, between one and two million residents of Belorussia were killed during the occupation, and some three million people were left homeless. Most of Belorussia’s cities lay in ruins at the time of liberation in 1944, and thousands of villages were burned down during so-called “anti-partisan operations.” In 1945, Belorussia’s industrial capacity was just twenty percent of its prewar level; the number of cattle was at thirty-one percent of the prewar level. Under the German occupation, there were as many as five different administrative units on the territory of present-day Belarus.

German policies in Belorussia sparked a growing resistance movement, which by the end of the occupation was the second-largest in Europe after Tito’s in Yugoslavia. This fact led British historian Gerald Reitlinger to remark that the “real history” of Belorussia under German occupation “must be sought in the annals of Partisan warfare.” In addition to the resistance movement, however, there was a web of indigenous institutions and organizations that helped the occupiers (some willingly and others with reservations) to implement their policies.

Collaboration in Belorussia took various forms and expressed itself in various fields, including the persecution of Belorussian Jewry. Many studies of collaboration in the Holocaust in Belorussia refer only to the Western territories—i.e., to the areas that were part of Generalkommissariat Weißruthenien—and take into account only the local auxiliary police and the “local self-administration,” two bodies that were involved directly in the extermination process. However, the case of Eastern Belorussia, where a whole generation had been raised on Soviet slogans of internationalism and
“friendship between nations,” is equally important for the historian dealing with inter-ethnic relations during World War II. Moreover, if we focus exclusively on so-called “official collaboration,” or the independent variable, we are touching merely the tip of the iceberg. For us as historians, it is more interesting to examine the attitude of the general public toward the murders that took place before its eyes, a variable that was dependent upon a number of factors, including German policies and the prewar situation.

**Inter-Ethnic Relations in Belorussia between the World Wars**

Belorussia was divided between Poland and the Soviet Union for most of the interwar period. In the Polish part of Belorussia the majority of Jews lived in small towns (*shtetlakh*), where in many cases they constituted 50 percent or more of the total population. The Jews’ contacts with the non-Jewish (predominantly Belorussian) population of the surrounding countryside were rather infrequent. Until the annexation of Western Belorussia by the Soviet Union in 1939, the Jewish population here was largely unassimilated, retaining its traditional ways of life as well as its traditional occupations (small-scale commerce and handicrafts). During most of this period, Poland’s official policies towards its many ethnic minorities were a matter of political fashion. Thus, policies were relatively liberal immediately after the end of the First World War, when Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points guaranteeing extensive rights to national minorities set the tone. Regarding the Jews, this relative liberalism expressed itself in part through the granting of extensive autonomy to the Jewish communities (*kehiles*) throughout Poland. However, at the same time, hostility toward the Jews was increasing in Polish society. In 1919, especially in the course of Polish-Soviet war, Poland had witnessed a wave of pogroms against the Jews. These pogroms encompassed parts of western Belorussia as well. Here they accompanied the establishment of Polish rule. Thus, thirty-nine Jews were killed in Lida, and thirty were killed in Minsk. In Pinsk, a local Polish garrison commander ordered the shooting of Jews who had assembled for prayer, claiming that they were communists assembled for a meeting. In other incidents, Polish soldiers burst into synagogues, defiled the Torah scrolls, and abused local Jews. Later, the Polonization of the economy led to ruin and impoverishment for many Polish Jews. Many became dependent upon social welfare institutions, which in turn increased much of the Polish public’s perception of Jews as a burden on the Polish economy.

Polish Jewry’s situation worsened in the 1930s, especially after Poland signed a non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany in 1934 and the death of Marshal Piłsudski in 1935. Poland imported not only German goods, but German ideas as well. One such idea was that it was possible to oust the Jews from various spheres of life and to humiliate them without provoking the outrage of the civilized world. In the last years preceding the outbreak of World War II the Polish Parliament (Sejm) considered various measures intended to curtail the Jews’ basic civil rights, forbidding them to
engage in various professions, to send Jewish children to Polish schools, and so on.\textsuperscript{15} At the same time, a campaign of wide-scale antisemitic propaganda similar to that in Nazi Germany was unrolled in Poland. One of the most popular slogans of this propaganda was “Swoj do Swego!” calling on Poles to buy only from Poles. Some practices, such as the stationing of vigilantes at the entrances to Jewish shops in order to prevent people from entering, were aped directly from the Third Reich. These trends were accompanied by a wave of pogroms (e.g., Grodno in 1935, Mińsk Mazowiecki in 1936, and Częstochowa in 1937) that engulfed Western Belorussia as well.\textsuperscript{16} Israeli historian Ben-Cion Pinchuk has noted aptly that state antisemitism became “a respectable ideology” in interwar Poland.\textsuperscript{17}

At the same time, while Polish policies toward the Jews became increasingly discriminatory, relations between Jews and non-Jews in various localities remained rather neighborly.\textsuperscript{18} Belorussian political nationalism, which began to develop only at the beginning of twentieth century, was directed primarily against the Warsaw’s Polonization policies; it did not perceive Jews as enemies. Only during the Nazi occupation did Belorussian nationalists adopt an explicitly antisemitic rhetoric. Official Warsaw’s discriminatory policies toward the Jewish and Belorussian minorities had one important, long-range consequence. According to Belorussian historian Evgenii Rozenblat, Polish policies marginalized both minorities and increased their susceptibility to propaganda from the East. The situation in the Soviet part of Belorussia (especially during the 1920s) led to the spread of pro-Soviet moods among the Jews and Belorussians living in the Polish “Eastern Districts” (Kresy Wschodnie)\textsuperscript{19}

Officially, at least, Jews enjoyed equal rights in the Soviet part of Belorussia. The abolition of the discriminatory measures of tsarist times, including the infamous \textit{numerus clausus} in the universities, accompanied the increasing erosion of the traditional Jewish way of life and led to greater integration of Jews—especially those of the younger generation, into the surrounding society. Thus, for example, in 1935 students comprised about twenty percent of the entire Jewish population of the Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR).\textsuperscript{20} Mixed marriages, which were extremely rare in the Western part of the country, became quite common in Soviet Belorussia. In the 1920s, the authorities made Yiddish one of the official languages of the republic in an effort to encourage the “Jewish toiling masses” to become acquainted with communist ideology,\textsuperscript{21} and the Belorussian State University established a department for training teachers for Jewish secondary schools.\textsuperscript{22}

However, antisemitism was still alive in eastern Belorussia. From the very beginning of their rule, the Bolsheviks faced a dilemma. On the one hand, after 1917 the Soviet authorities officially condemned antisemitism as “a vestige of the bourgeois past”\textsuperscript{23} and promoted “friendship among nations.” On the other hand, the Bolsheviks condemned the traditional Jewish occupations—especially small-scale trade—as “bourgeois.” Those engaged in such occupations were labeled \textit{lishentsy}, meaning persons deprived of their electoral rights.\textsuperscript{24} Though numerous testimonies refer to
the fact that antisemitism was a crime punishable by Soviet law,25 in reality clause eighty-four of the Criminal Code of the BSSR established a penalty of imprisonment or even death not for antisemitism as such, but rather for “propaganda and agitation intended to incite national or religious animosity or dissent.” As Russian scholar Artur Livshits has shown, the Soviet Belorussian authorities implemented clause eighty-four rather reluctantly in cases of individual displays of antisemitism.26

Several factors assured the persistence of antisemitism in Soviet Belorussia. One was the progressive urbanization of the heretofore predominantly agrarian country in the 1920s and 1930s. The urban population of Eastern Belorussia rose from 847,830 (17% of the total population) in 1926 to 1,372,522 (24.6% of the total population) in 1939. The combined population of the five major cities—Minsk, Vitelbsk, Gomel, Mogilev, and Bobruisk—increased by around 305,000.27 Urban dwellers traditionally, Jews were better prepared for life in the city than non-Jews arriving from the countryside. The non-Jews’ difficulties in adapting themselves to the new reality led to an increase in anti-Jewish moods. Despite the Soviet authorities’ efforts to suppress these moods, hostility toward the Jews sometimes broke out into the open. Thus in 1928, workers in Bobruisk and Sluzk demonstrated against the economic policy of the Soviet regime under the slogan of the infamous Black Hundreds: “Strike the Jews, save Russia!”28 Likewise, some non-Jews found it incomprehensible that the Jews, who only a quarter century before had been a humiliated minority—second-class citizens subject to discrimination and violence—had become almost overnight not only equals, but also bearers of authority. Because the Jews traditionally had been the scapegoats in the Russian Empire, they were a natural target for complaints about any unpopular measure under Soviet rule, be it the “war communism” of 1918–1921, the New Economic Policy of the 1920s, or the forced collectivization of the 1930s.29

The so-called “Reunion of Belorussia” that took place in September 1939, only a month after the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact’s signing, only augmented existing tensions in Belorussia.30 In his recent study Konterrevolutionäre Elemente sind zu erschießen (Counterrevolutionary Elements Are to Be Shot),31 Polish historian Bogdan Musial ascribes the sharp rise of antisemitism in the territories annexed by the Soviet Union in September 1939 to the role that the Jews played there during the period between September 1939 and June 1941, linking them to the crimes committed by NKVD32 during that time. He also describes the attitude that many Jews allegedly adopted toward non-Jews—especially Poles—in the annexed territories during the Soviet period as “abusive.”33 According to Musial, these factors led to violent outbursts against Jews in the first days and weeks after the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union and to the escalation of Nazi extermination policies.

Musial’s thesis has been criticized on numerous occasions by historians such as Dieter Pohl.34 Pohl suggests quite rightly that Musial’s portrait of the entire Jewish population as the main beneficiary of Soviet rule has very little to do with objective
historical analysis, considering for example that Jews constituted twenty-five percent of the deportees from the annexed Polish territories—a percentage that was much higher than their proportion in the population of these territories. In general, when speaking of a correlation between “Soviet crimes” and Nazi extermination policies after June 22, 1941, one must remember that documents such as the infamous “Commissar Order,” not to mention various anti-Jewish decrees, were envisaged before a single German soldier stepped into Soviet territory and before the first mass graves of NKVD victims were ever opened. The Stalinist atrocities were, it seems, for the Germans of propagandistic rather than of practical value. They provided a justification for the various measures of the occupation regime, but were not the cause of the ensuing events.

The image of Jews welcoming Soviet forces became widespread in Polish public discourse both during and after World War II, serving as a kind of pretext for such outbursts as the Jedwabne massacre. In fact, most Jews had little reason to celebrate the establishment of the Soviet regime. The Sovietization of the local economy as well as the waves of deportations to Central Asia and the Far East had a devastating effect on Western Belorussian Jewry. For the most part, Jews’ initial joy at the entrance of the Red Army stemmed not from their identification with communism, but rather from their expectation that the Soviets would “forestall” the dreaded Nazis. Moreover, as we have seen, the Polish government in the interwar period had done much to alienate its minorities (not only the Jews). Jan Tomasz Gross expresses an interesting opinion regarding the constant accusations that the Jews supported the Soviets during the two years following the Soviet annexation of Western Belorussia and Western Ukraine:

Enthusiastic Jewish response to entering Red Army units was not a widespread phenomenon at all, and it is impossible to identify some innate, unique characteristics of Jewish collaboration with the Soviets during the period 1939–1941. On the other hand, it is manifest that the local non-Jewish population enthusiastically greeted entering Wehrmacht units in 1941 and broadly engaged in collaboration with the Germans, up to and including participation in the exterminatory war against the Jews. Thus it appears that the local non-Jewish population projected its own attitude toward the Germans in 1941 . . . .

The Soviets viewed the Poles living in the annexed areas as personae non gratae, to be removed from positions of authority. According to the Polish Government-in-Exile, Poles constituted 52 percent of the total number of deportees during the great deportations of 1940–1941. The Soviets preferred to put Belorussians (and in the Western Ukraine, Ukrainians)—the main “beneficiaries” of the changes, at least according to Soviet propaganda—in positions of authority. But here the Soviets were confronted with the same problem that the Germans would face later—namely the dearth of sufficiently qualified Belorussians. Moreover, Belorussians who had lived for a long period under “capitalist rule” were viewed with suspicion. The Soviets were
compelled to appoint Jews and even some Poles to do the actual work, with Belorussians serving as figureheads.\textsuperscript{40} In Slonim raion, for example, of 1,804 appointees, 782 (43.3\%) were Jews and 189 (10.4\%) were Poles.\textsuperscript{41} In addition, swarms of so-called “easterners” (vostochniki), i.e., officials from the old Soviet territories, were sent out to the newly acquired areas. Many of these, too, were Jews.\textsuperscript{42} According to data provided by Evgenii Rozenblat, in several places (e.g., Brest oblast), Jews were appointed to high positions within the NKVD and the judicial apparatus, both of which were associated with the repressive policies of the new regime.\textsuperscript{43} Soviet measures such as the nationalization of medium-sized and small enterprises, the abolition of the złoty as the national currency, and high taxation led to increasing dissatisfaction with the new situation. The “buying fever” of the Soviet soldiers and their families, which soon emptied the shops, likewise aroused resentment. Waves of repressive actions in 1940 and 1941 transformed this dissatisfaction into hatred of the Soviet regime.

Many Belorussians, having believed initially the Soviet slogans of “national liberation,” felt cheated and began to blame the traditional scapegoat, the Jew. It was irrelevant for them that the Jews had been hit just as hard, if not harder, by the economic policies of the Soviets. A number of Jews had been placed in positions of authority; this was enough to breathe new life into the old stereotype of “Judeo-Bolshevism” and to augment antisemitic moods. These moods expressed themselves for the most part in passive forms. For example many people stuffed notes with the words “Death to the Bolsheviks and the Jews” and “Long live Hitler” into ballot boxes during the election to the National Assembly.\textsuperscript{44} But sometimes they took more active forms; the peasants of the village of Narbutovichi (Diatlovo raion, Baranovichi oblast) refused to accept a new schoolteacher, Rider, simply because he was a Jew.\textsuperscript{45}

Local Collaboration in the Holocaust in Belorussia

On the eve of the German invasion, Belorussian Jewry numbered about one million people. The Jewish population was largely exterminated in two waves: between the late summer and December 1941 and from spring 1942 through the end of that year (although the extermination of remnants of Jewish communities continued into 1943). In Belorussian territory, the death rate among Jews during the Holocaust was among the highest in Europe, reaching around 80 percent of the prewar Jewish population.\textsuperscript{46} Belorussia became the graveyard not only of local Jews, but also of Jews transported there from other parts of Europe—mainly from Germany, Austria, the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia (the present-day Czech Republic), the General Government, and the Warthegau (the Polish territory annexed by the Third Reich). Also in Belorussia, new killing techniques such as the infamous Gaswagens (mobile gas chambers), nicknamed by the population dushegubki (murder vans) were first tested.\textsuperscript{47}

In Western Europe, including Germany itself, the extermination process—as depicted by Raul Hilberg in his classic and controversial work The Destruction of the...
European Jews—unfolded over a relatively long period. Some years passed between various stages, beginning with the curtailment of Jews’ civil rights and ending with deportations to the extermination camps in the East. In the occupied Soviet territories, by contrast, the process was much shorter. Only a few months—or even weeks or days—passed between the removal of Jews from society and their murder. Whether the environment, meaning the general attitudes of the society in which the Jews lived, influenced this difference is a legitimate question. In Western Europe, including Germany, the emancipation of the Jews began as early as the nineteenth century. At the time of the Nazis’ rise to power, Jewish civic equality was by and large an accepted fact. In pre–World War I Eastern Europe—especially those territories that were part of the Russian Empire—antisemitism was an integral part of official policy, and pogroms were not uncommon. The Jews still were perceived by many non-Jews as second-class citizens, as a humiliated minority. In Western Europe, including Germany, Nazi rulers were compelled to persuade the general public that Jews were not in fact part of the society as a preliminary step to the extermination of Jews; in the Ostraum, they could skip the stage of persuasion and go directly to the stage of outright murder. This may explain, at least in part, the difference in the pace of the extermination processes in Western and Eastern Europe.

Although Nazis regarded most of the peoples living in the East, especially the Slavs, as “subhumans” (Untermenschen), they were aware of the antisemitic sentiments common among these peoples and were eager to use these feelings for their own purposes. For the Germans, the participation of the local population in the persecution of Jews served both propaganda and practical purposes. From the moment of their rise to power, National Socialists had been careful to present their every step against the Jews, beginning with the anti-Jewish boycott of April 1, 1933, as the spontaneous expression of “a popular will to self-cleansing.” The same logic was at work in the occupied Soviet territories, including Belorussia. In his instructions to the Einsatzgruppen (mobile killing units) that followed the Wehrmacht units into the Soviet Union in June 1941, Heydrich wrote: “No obstacles should be put in the way of strivings for self-cleansing (Seltbstbereinigungsbestrebungen) on the part of anti-communist or anti-Jewish circles in the newly occupied territories. On the contrary, they are to be instigated, of course imperceptibly, intensified, and directed into the right course (in die richtigen Bahnen zu lenken).” These “strivings for self-cleansing” were supposed to provide a kind of justification for the Nazis’ murderous politics.

At the same time, the German bodies that were responsible for executing the “Final Solution of the Jewish Question” faced the problem of a lack of manpower. The German Army’s heavy losses on the Eastern Front, which increased drastically after the defeat in the battle of Moscow in the winter of 1941–1942, led to increasing demand for reinforcements. The units stationed in the occupied territories close to the front were seen as the natural reserve for such reinforcements. Whereas in the summer of 1941 the commander of Rear Area, Army Group Center, had at his
disposal up to six divisions for so-called “cleansing operations,” by the autumn of the same year this number was reduced to four.\textsuperscript{51} Moreover, from the very outset, the Einsatzgruppen “cleansing” Soviet territories of all “undesirables”—primarily the Jews and the Communists—were small units. Thus Einsatzgruppe B, which was under the command of Brigadeführer SS (Major General) Artur Nebe, consisted of only 655 men.\textsuperscript{52} Further, the German bodies responsible for the so-called “cleansing operations” (\textit{Säuberungsaktionen}) operated in unfamiliar territory, where they did not necessarily know who was Jewish and who was not. As a result, Jews with a so-called “Aryan appearance” could easily escape the notice of these units. On the other hand, the Germans were not concerned if errors were made. For example, in Baranovichi, southwest of Minsk, all of the inhabitants—both Jewish and non-Jewish—of one of the city’s streets were executed because, to the Germans, they all looked Jewish.\textsuperscript{53}

It is difficult to measure the Belorussian population’s initial readiness to collaborate with the Germans in the persecution of Jews. In most of Belorussia, the German invasion was not accompanied by outbursts of violence such as occurred in Lithuania and West Ukraine, but this alone does not signify an absence of readiness.\textsuperscript{54} Especially in West Belorussia, in towns such as Grodno, Novogrudok, and Ivice, anti-Jewish pogroms and lootings of Jewish property did occur.\textsuperscript{55} Those that took place in predominantly Polish areas can be seen as outbursts of the antisemitism that had been brewing in the previous decades and which intensified after September 1939. As Dieter Pohl has argued, it would be wrong to connect them to any real “collaboration” between the Jews and the Soviet regime or to NKVD crimes committed in the annexed territories after September 1939.\textsuperscript{56}

The early Einsatzgruppen reports on Belorussian attitudes toward anti-Jewish policies are rather contradictory. On the one hand, they refer to the friendly attitude of Belorussians toward the Germans and to the intensification of collaboration in tracking down “undesirables.”\textsuperscript{57} They mention “kolkhoz chairmen and Dorfähleute [village elders]”\textsuperscript{58} who came “from a distance of 40–50 km in order to ask that their communities be cleansed of Bolshevist and Jewish elements.”\textsuperscript{59} On the other hand, the reports also speak of the Belorussian population’s lack of readiness to commit acts of physical violence against Jews. For example, a daily report dated August 5, 1941 notes that “there is practically no Belorussian national consciousness left in that area. A pronounced antisemitism is also missing. . . . In general, the population harbors a feeling of hatred and rage toward the Jews and approves of the German measures . . . but it is not able by itself to take the initiative in regard to the treatment of the Jews.”\textsuperscript{60} This last phrase—together with the fact that for the most part, Lithuanian and Ukrainian police battalions, not Belorussian units, participated in the massacres—has given rise to apologetic interpretations of the Belorussian population’s role in the Holocaust.\textsuperscript{61} But even if Belorussian nationalism was not outspokenly anti-semitic before the war, during the German occupation local nationalists organized various collaborationist bodies, such as the Belorussian Popular Self-Help Organization.
and the Union of Belorussian Youth, and did not shrink from participating in the persecution of Jews. Thus, it is not easy to establish where German influence ended and indigenous activity began.

The active participation of “outside” auxiliary police units in mass killings in Belorussia is evidenced by the fact that the first Belorussian police unit of battalion size (the 49th Schutzmannschaft Battalion) was created only in August 1942. At the same time, local auxiliary police units created in Belorussia in the first weeks and months of the Nazi invasion played an active role in the persecution of Jews.

In their testimonies, Holocaust survivors from the region observe that the general change in the atmosphere occurred within a matter of days after the Germans’ entrance. These Jews’ sense of the surrounding society’s hostility left them feeling helpless. For example, Frida Raisman from Minsk noted in her recently published testimony: “With the transfer into the ghetto all had been changed literally in the course of one day. We were isolated from the majority of the population and at this moment all that until then was perhaps deeply concealed came to the light. Friends no longer recognized us; in mixed families it often happened that the wives denounced their husbands or vice versa.”

In discussing Belorussians’ reactions to German anti-Jewish policies, we must differentiate between the removal of the Jews from society and their physical elimination. The various discriminatory measures that were introduced in the first days and weeks of the occupation included forbidding Jews to step onto sidewalks or to use public transportation. Jews were marked by yellow patches, which in many places were worn both on the breast and on the back, and which the non-Jewish local population cynically nicknamed “The Order of Stalin” and “The Order of Lenin.” It appears that the ghettoization of the Jews did not arouse significant opposition on the part of the local non-Jews. Complaints about the “troubles” that the Jews made for local residents were not uncommon. In some instances, non-Jews openly declared: “Let them die, they did us a lot of harm!” Undoubtedly, the initial attitude of the non-Jewish population toward the persecution of Jews was a mixture of traditional antisemitism and fear of the new authorities. However, we should also look more deeply and ask whether the dividing line that the Germans drew between Jews and non-Jews was perceived by many Belorussians as a kind of return of the Jews to their “natural state,” i.e., to that of a humbled and persecuted minority. Thus, it seems that many non-Jews, still thinking in terms dating back to the era of the Pale of Settlement, did not oppose the isolation of the Jews.

At the same time, we may suppose that the units engaged in the killing of Jews had to rely upon the assistance of locals who knew the territory and knew which individuals were Jewish. From the available documents, it appears that such assistance was not rare. Denunciations of Jews became widespread during the first months of the occupation; the Germans set up rows of “information posts” (Anzeigestellen) where non-Jews could submit information about the whereabouts of Jews and communists...
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67 The motivations for denunciation of Jews were varied. Sometimes personal conflicts led non-Jews to turn in their Jewish neighbors. Even bonds of family could not always provide protection against denunciation. For example, a woman from the village of Davidovka was denounced by her Belorussian mother-in-law. In Minsk, a non-Jewish woman, upon seeing her Jewish husband—who had fled from his embattled Soviet military unit—gave him away with a cry of “Catch the zhid!”

68 Israeli researcher Daniel Romanovsky has put forward an interesting theory to explain the readiness of the non-Jewish population in Belorussia to turn Jews over to the Germans. In his view, many Belorussians, particularly among Eastern Belorussia’s agrarian population, saw the war between Germany and the Soviet Union as a continuation of the Russian civil war of the 1920s. One of that conflict’s most striking features was a frequent change of regime. In this context, many saw the Germans merely as the latest in a series of new authorities. The Soviet period had been characterized by an incessant struggle against so-called “anti-popular elements,” i.e., real or imaginary enemies of the Soviet regime such as “bourgeois elements,” “deviationists” (uklonisty), Trotskyites, or kulaks. Now the new authorities arrived with a new list of enemies; it is not so difficult to imagine that those who only a couple of years earlier had participated in eliminating kulaks from their villages were now prepared and possibly even eager to participate in the elimination of Jews from their midst.

69 Moreover, in the last years before the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, particularly after the annexation of eastern Polish territories, the persecution of “counterrevolutionary elements” had proceeded not only along class, but along national lines as well. Therefore, there are grounds for Romanovsky’s conclusion that the “Soviet regime created a kind of citizen well suited to life under a totalitarian regime such as the Nazis established.”

70 The Germans increasingly depended on local collaborationist bodies, and above all on the so-called “local self-administration” and the auxiliary police. These bodies were formed at the very beginning of the German invasion of the Soviet Union. The local Bürgermeistern (mayors) were often key figures at various stages of the genocide process. The local self-administration organs were of paramount importance during the preparatory stages for the mass killings. Many of those appointed to key positions were natives to the area and were familiar with the local Jewish community. Moreover, they knew which of the city’s neighborhoods were the poorest and should therefore be assigned to the Jews—which gave them an important role in the ghettoization process. Therefore, it is not surprising that when the Germans created the Judenräte in the summer of 1941 for the purpose of registering all local Jews, they placed them under the control of the provisional “town commissar”—a forerunner of the Bürgermeister. Thus, in many places, such as Minsk, Borisov, and Stolbtsy (southwest of Minsk), Jewish ghettos were under the direct control of the local city council (uprava). The local uprava in Minsk for example, early on
established a special “Department for Jewish Affairs” (адель па зидоўскім справам), which was responsible for, among other things, supplying the ghetto with food and medicines and allocating work to ghetto inhabitants. The local “mayors” were responsible for sealing the ghettos to prevent any possibility of contacts between ghetto inmates and the non-Jewish population. An order issued in 1941 by the Stolbcy Bürgermeister Ivan Aūdzej (Jan Awdziej) reveals that such contacts were common. The order demanded that local non-Jews “stop smuggling food to the Jews.”

The fact that the ghettoization process in Belorussia was rapid, with most of the ghettos established between summer and fall 1941, also points to the active role of the local self-administration in this process. Local bodies acted in close cooperation with the German military authorities; in Minsk, for example, the order for the establishment of the ghetto was signed jointly by the military commandant of the city and the Bürgermeister, Vitold (Vitaut) Tumash.

In many cases, officials of the upravas acted as overlords in the ghetto, ruling arbitrarily in matters of life and death. Thus, for example, the person responsible for the Minsk ghetto was Vladimir Gorodetskii, a drunkard who, according to his own boastings, before the war had taught history of the Communist Party in a Leningrad institution of higher learning. Gorodetskii entered the ghetto whenever he pleased, robbing its inmates and allegedly even murdering Jews “just for fun.”

One of the most striking examples of local collaborationist bodies’ participation in the extermination process is that of Stanislav Stankevich, the mayor of Borisov, and the chief of the Borisov police, an ethnic German by the name of David Egof. Stankevich was active in all stages of the extermination process, issuing orders for the ghettoization of local Jews, taking steps against those Jews who tried to defy ghettoization orders, “taxing” ghetto inmates with requisitions of cash and valuables, and ultimately, together with Egof, bearing direct responsibility for the massacre of between 6,500 and 7,000 members of the Jewish community in October 1941.

Egof played an active role in the misappropriation of property left by the murdered Jews. At the time of his arrest in January 1942, many valuables were found in his office. Both Stankevich and Egof had lived and worked in Soviet territory prior to the Nazi invasion (Stankevich was a teacher in Novogrudok and Egof in Zembin). Thus, in trying to explain the motives for their conduct, we may assume both traditional antisemitism as well as a strong desire to prove their loyalty to German authorities. There is room also to speak of the intoxication of power that stemmed from the subordination of the ghetto to the local administration.

Generally, the organs of local self-administration—and particularly the auxiliary police—increased their roles as the extermination process widened. Local policemen became more visible during the second wave of mass murders, which began in spring 1942 and reached its peak in the summer of the same year. This change can be attributed to the general increase, beginning in late 1941, of local police forces. According
to a report of the Order Police commander in Generalkommissariat für Weißruthenien (civil administration for Belorussia), the local police force increased in size from 3,682 men in December 1941 to 6,850 men in April 1943. In the Rear Area of Army Group Center, which included East Belorussia, the local auxiliary police forces were called the Ordnungsdienst (Order Service); here too, as Christian Gerlach has shown, these forces increased over the course of the occupation. According to the reports of military authorities, the Ordnungsdienst consisted of 13,000 men in mid-1942, and 12,000 additional police officers were recruited at that time. A year later, in 1943, the Ordnungsdienst in the entire Army Group Center area consisted of 45,000 men. This expansion of local police forces was connected both to the rise of the resistance movement in Belorussia, especially after mid-1942, and to the shifting of the German forces to the Eastern Front.

In fact, everywhere in Belorussia where mass murders of the Jewish populations took place we find evidence of the active participation of local police forces. In Borisov, the local police controlled the implementation of the “yellow patch” orders and oversaw the resettlement of the Jews into the ghettos. During the Aktionen they rounded up Jews from their houses, transported the victims to the killing spots, erected cordons around the places of execution, and finally pulled the triggers of their guns during the execution itself. In some instances the local police force carried out executions on its own initiative, without German supervision. For example in Chaussey, to the southeast of Mogilev, the commander of the local police personally ordered the execution of the town’s Jewish families. The conduct of the local policemen, many of whom were intoxicated during the executions, aroused loathing even among the Germans. Survivors have described the conduct of the auxiliary policemen as, in many cases, more brutal than that of the Germans. Oswald Rufeisen, a Jewish boy who during the German occupation posed as a Pole and worked briefly as a secretary and translator for the police force of Mir in Western Belorussia, described a certain difference between German and Belorussian policemen’s attitude toward participation in Aktionen. According to Rufeisen, many German policemen—unlike the Belorussian police—perceived the killing of Jews as a “dirty business” from which it was permissible to abstain when possible. Moreover, the inclusion of women and children among the victims, especially after the late summer of 1941, demanded a search for some kind of justification. It was not by chance that in 1942, as we have seen, the stereotype of the intimate connection between Jews and partisans spread among the German authorities in both Western and Eastern Belorussia.

It was, however, possible to avoid participation in executions. For example, a Polish policeman from Western Belorussia claimed that his physical condition did not allow him to participate in the shootings since in such situations he lost consciousness. But very few policemen availed themselves of this opportunity. On the contrary, local policemen often participated in the persecution of Jews quite enthusiastically. Rufeisen’s observation is corroborated by documentary evidence. Thus,
when the raion chief of the Borisov Ordnungsdienst demanded that the Ordnungsdienst commander in Novo-Borisov dispatch fifteen policemen to oversee the resettlement of the Jews into the Borisov ghetto, seventeen appeared instead. This difference in attitude may be explained, at least in part, by the fact that in the perverted thinking of those times, murder was considered routine and excessive brutality was a kind of “work distinction” that could lead to promotions or material benefits. That is, policemen saw participation in the murder of unarmed people as a means to improve their families’ material situation. This was of no small significance in the difficult economic circumstances resulting from Nazi occupation policies.

It is not easy, however, to establish the role of “pure” antisemitism in the readiness of the local policemen to participate in the murder of Jews. Thus, for example, before the war Jews lived in relative harmony with their Belorussian and Polish neighbors in the town of Mir. But it was the local police—most of whom had not been among the most outspoken antisemites before the Nazi occupation—who distinguished themselves by their brutality in the persecution of Jews. Moreover, many policemen, especially in the eastern part of Belorussia, belonged to a generation that came of age during the Soviet period. Although former members of the Communist Party and the Komsomol (communist youth organization) were not eligible officially to serve in the police force, documentary evidence reveals that a significant number of former communists and Komsomoltsy not only served in the rank and file of the police forces, but also occupied high positions. Even the reports of partisan intelligence could not deny the presence of communists and Komsomol members among the collaborators. According to these reports, the chief of police in the Kojdanov raion (present-day Dzerzhinsk, Minsk oblast) was a former communist, and his deputy had been a Komsomol member before the war. A senior police officer in the same police division had been a candidate for Communist Party membership before the occupation. Similarly, the head of the police force of Gomel was a former communist and Red Army colonel. For police officials such as these, the need to prove their loyalty to the Germans may have been a stronger motivator than pure antisemitism. The former police secretary of Mir described the conduct of local policemen this way: “The policemen could kill or beat anyone without any reason. . . . It was enough to say that the future victim was a partisan or a communist to justify themselves in the eyes of the Gendarmerie. They killed people to prove their loyalty to the German authorities. That group was very enthusiastic about the murders. . . .”

Among the persecutors were many people who before the war had been friends, acquaintances, business partners, colleagues, or clients of the local Jews. In his study dealing with the Holocaust in Eastern Belorussia, Shalom Cholawsky gives the following example from Minsk. Returning to the ghetto one day with a work column, a Jewish woman who had worked before the war as pediatrician recognized a former patient among the local policemen standing on the sidewalk. She had saved this man’s life. When she approached him to ask for help, the policeman threw her to
the ground and kicked her with such cruelty that she was brought back to the ghetto nearly unconscious. As we have seen, even bonds of family did not guarantee survival. A peasant from the village of Parichi, upon joining the local auxiliary police, killed his Jewish wife and their two children with his own hands.

What exactly did non-Jews know about the fate of the local Jews? As the incidents mentioned above indicate, they knew quite a lot and certainly more than the Germans wanted them to know. Indeed, the German authorities did their utmost not to attract the attention of the locals to the mass executions. This, of course, was not for humanitarian reasons, but out of fear that “excesses” during these executions would damage the image of Germans in the eyes of the local population. On August 30, 1941, the head of the Gestapo, Heinrich Müller, issued a telegram to all Einsatzgruppen ordering that they “prevent the crowding of spectators during the mass executions” (bei Massen-Exekutionen das Ansammeln von Zuschauern . . . zu verhindern). As various scholars have shown, in most cases mass shootings of Jews were carried out either on the outskirts or outside of towns.

However, it was difficult to conceal mass executions. In many places, locals who were sent to dig ditches in preparation for the killings were the first to spread the word about the forthcoming executions. Usually Jews were led to the execution sites in the full view of the local non-Jews. In some cases, locals participated in the roundups of their Jewish neighbors. Just before the liquidation of the Krinek (Krynki) ghetto (Grodno area) in November 1942, Germans invited Poles from the area to take part in the “celebrations” of the Juden-Aktion. On the day of the Aktion, the Poles assembled just outside the ghetto’s gates armed with clubs, beating Jews as they were led out of the ghetto to the execution site. The police cordons erected around the killing places also provided clues as to what was going on. The perpetrators themselves often spoke openly about “ghetto cleansings” and were not ashamed to describe in detail all the atrocities they committed during the Aktionen. Thus, in a state of drunkenness, the commander of the Nesvizh police told the inhabitants of the village of Snov about his participation in the massacre of the Jews of Baranovichi in June 1943, and how during the massacre he personally threw Jews from second- and third-floor balconies.

At the same time, the broadening scale of the mass murders led to a certain change in the non-Jewish population’s attitude. Whereas their attitude toward measures that were intended to rob the Jews of their civil rights could be described as neutrally affirmative, the non-Jews sometimes condemned the mass executions that claimed the lives of hundreds and thousands. In Borisov, for example, the same people who had been eager to get rid of the “Jewish trouble-makers” expressed quite a different opinion after the Aktion: “Who ordered such a thing? How can 6,500 Jews be killed in one go? It’s the Jews now, when will our turn come? What have these poor Jews done? All they did was work! Those who are really guilty are safe!” It seems that anxiety over the questions of “When will our turn come?” and “Who will
be the next target of Nazi terror?” played a more dominant role in these condemnations than did indignation about the atrocities or sympathy for the victims. Thus, in November 1942 the head of the district Gendarmerie in Brest reported that rumors were circulating in the city according to which “after the Jewish actions, first the Poles, then the Russians, and then the Ukrainians [would] be shot.”

Collaboration in the persecution of Jews involved not only denunciation and murder, but also the misappropriation of Jewish property. So far, the historiography on this topic has treated Belorussia cursorily. One of the traditional stereotypes of Jews, widespread in Belorussia as well as in other eastern territories, was that they were fabulously wealthy. Undoubtedly, the desire for Jewish property influenced the attitude of the local population toward various anti-Jewish measures. The Germans, for their part, made every effort to strengthen the stereotype of Jewish wealth. For example, in March 1942, immediately after the mass murders of Jews in Minsk, Vilejka, and Baranovichi, the German authorities organized for the local non-Jewish population “inspections” of the victims’ homes; the purpose was to demonstrate that “the Jews still possess[ed] large stores of food products, while their own supply situation [was] extraordinarily bad.” According to various testimonies, the misappropriation of Jewish property was widespread and manifested itself in the basest of forms. On the eve of an Aktion inside the ghetto, locals assembled with their wheelbarrows in the streets leading to the ghetto in anticipation of the moment when the massacre would be over and they could begin the wild orgy of pillage.

The German officials themselves complained that there were not enough police “to stop the local population’s thirst for robbery.” In many places, the property of murdered Jews became a point of contention between the officials of the “local self-administration” and the Germans. Thus Vasil’ev, the Bürgermeister of the small town of Samokhvalovichi, complained to the Minsk raion administration about the conduct of Wehrmacht soldiers who seized cattle, poultry, and other property left by the Jews and threatened at gunpoint the local officials and policemen who tried to stop them. In some cases, there was real competition between German authorities and locals for possession of Jewish property. Sometimes the misappropriation of Jewish property began while the Jews were still alive. In the town of Usviaty in the south of Pskov oblast (today northwest Russia) one of the local non-Jews turned to an old Jew named Zalman, whose son had just been killed, with the following words: “Give me your cow—they are going to shoot you anyway and then the Germans will get your cow.”

Local officials were the first to profit from seizure of Jewish property. After the Aktionen, local policemen entered the ghetto in the search of hidden Jews, which gave them the opportunity to loot Jewish houses. Thus in testimony submitted to Soviet interrogators after the war, former Gemeindebürgermeister of Korsakovichi Konstantin Mozolevskii reported that the policemen who participated in the massacre of Borisov Jews returned with “watches and other items that they received as a reward from the property of the executed Jews.” According to an order issued by
Wilhelm Kube, the head of civil administration in Belorussia (Generalkommissar für Weißruthenien), police officers together with their families were supposed to occupy “the better” apartments of the murdered Jews. In general, policemen entered the ghetto whenever they pleased, looting, raping, and killing. In Minsk, such “visits” were quite regular and claimed scores of victims.

Though the Germans saw the local populations as rivals in the seizure of Jewish property, for certain purposes they were eager to involve them directly or indirectly in this process. For the occupying authorities, the distribution of Jewish property was a cheap and easy way to solve economic problems—at least in part. Thus, according to a directive issued by the Ostministerium on April 13, 1942, local employees of German war-industry enterprises in the occupied “eastern territories” were to be supplied with textiles confiscated from Jews.

Apart from the so-called “wild” (spontaneous) misappropriations, there were also “organized” or “quasi-organized” misappropriations. The local uprava was supposed to register Jewish property immediately after the Aktion took place. Some of this property was to be transferred to the German authorities, and some was to be distributed to local inhabitants. In Bobruisk, the local Kommandantur issued a special instruction regarding Jewish property in which it said that “all cash, securities, precious metals, necklaces, and other valuables must be transferred immediately to the Feldkommandantur,” while “the items that are not new and that did not possess a special value” should be released to the population.

The sale of Jewish houses was extremely profitable for the local upravas. According to a report of the financial department of the Mogilev uprava, in May 1942 the income from the sale of Jewish houses constituted approximately fifty-one percent of the uprava’s total income, while in June of the same year the share of the income from the sale of Jewish houses increased to more than sixty-five percent. Officially, in the sale of the Jewish houses and apartments priority was to be given to refugees and to people who had lost their homes as a result of fire or whose homes had been requisitioned by the German authorities. In reality, though, protectionism and nepotism were often the only criteria in the allocation of living quarters. In Novo-Borisov a refugee from Minsk was denied an apartment allocated to her by the city uprava when the man “responsible for the neighborhood” (possibly an uprava official), a certain Sarapaev, decided to transfer it to one of his acquaintances. The woman’s complaint to the head of the Borisov Ordnungsdienst did not help; Sarapaev refused to provide explanations, stating only that he had the necessary authority. This was a most revealing illustration of relations between various levels of the local self-administration.

The organs of local self-administration and the police were at pains to ensure that even the smallest piece of Jewish property would not get lost. Thus, Chief of Police Bakhanovich of Novo-Borisov asked Stankevich, the Rayonbürgermeister of
Borisov, what to do about those Jews who were “squandering” (razbazaricait) property, i.e., were transferring or selling their property secretly before resettling into the ghetto, as well as about those non-Jews who acquired the property. In July 1942, Stankevich demanded that the heads of the Borisov and Novo-Borisov police forces prepare reports on people who had acquired cows from the Jews without paying.

Often, expropriated Jewish property was sold in special stores and found its way to the black market. In Minsk, seized property was stored “to the height of a man (mannshoch)” in the local opera house. Since paper money had lost its value as a means of payment, this property became a kind of currency. We know for example of a woman in Minsk who exchanged chickens and eggs for clothes taken from Jews, and then exchanged the newly acquired clothes for food in Western Belorussia.

Indeed, it is difficult to name a local organization that did not profit in one way or another from the annihilation of the Jews. Among the main profit-makers the “Belorussian Self-Aid Organization” (BNS), whose official mission was to help those who were suffering as a result of the war and to take over the functions of the Belorussian Red Cross, certainly occupies a prominent place. In his report to the delegates of the Second All-Belorussian Congress assembled in Minsk, the president of the Belorussian Central Council (BCR), spoke of some 11.6 million rubles collected by the BNS “through public donations and as a result of its economic activity” in the financial year 1943. The sum mentioned is indeed very impressive, the more so if we take into account that this was at the end of the occupation period, when the economic situation of the majority of the Belorussians was very poor. It seems clear that there were sources of BNS income about which Astroński preferred to keep silent, especially when we take into account the fact that the Congress materials were edited in the 1950s—after the defeat of the Third Reich. Bernhard Chiari demonstrates that Jewish property was indeed one such source. Chiari cites documents indicating that BNS had used the Jewish property to replenish its cash and other supplies, and in 1942 had even issued a request to the German Gebietskommissare for transfer to the BNS authorities of property left behind after the liquidation of the Jewish ghettos. Of course, German functionaries simply ignored this request. Even hospitals profited directly or indirectly from the murder of Jews. In September 1942 the Stadtkommissar of Minsk pleaded with the health department of the Generalkommissariat für Weißruthenien to allocate to the city hospital items such as bedclothes from the Jewish property stored in the opera house.

Conclusions

It is difficult to measure the extent of the local population’s collaboration in the persecution of the Jews in Belorussia, since this collaboration took many forms, ranging from denunciations to theft of property to participation in mass shootings. Nor it is easy to establish regional differences in the pattern of such collaboration. The
phenomenon encompassed both western and eastern parts of the territory. In Eastern Belorussia, significant numbers of people, including former Communist Party and Komsomol members, collaborated with the German occupiers in various ways—including participation in the persecution of the Jews. Very roughly, and with an extreme measure of caution, we may conclude that, whereas in Western Belorussia nationalism or even Belorussian or Polish chauvinism figured prominently in the decision to turn against the Jews, in Eastern Belorussia it was more often pure opportunism that drove the people into the ranks of perpetrators.

Even if traditional antisemitism was quite strong in the territories that had been part of the Russian Empire, it alone does not suffice to explain the collaboration. Simple greed and the desire to demonstrate loyalty to the occupation regime were also behind individuals’ decisions to turn against their former neighbors, friends, and even family members. Nor can the general context in which the Holocaust took place be overlooked. Chiari aptly likened Belorussian society during the German occupation to a raft adrift in stormy waters. The passengers, struggling for their physical survival, were prepared to toss into the sea all those who were seen as “unnecessary ballast.” The Jews, as traditional outcasts, were the first to be cast out.

From the German point of view, local collaboration in the persecution of Jews provided a kind of alibi in that it enabled them to portray the Final Solution as a spontaneous process—an expression of the popular desire for “self-cleansing.” Even if this collaboration was narrower in scope than the Germans had hoped it would be, it was nevertheless a factor of paramount importance in the greatest tragedy of the twentieth century.

Notes
6. It is very difficult to establish the precise number of human losses in Belorussia during the period of Nazi occupation. In the Soviet period, the standard claim was that one in four residents of Belorussia perished. For more than fifty years after the Second World War, the figure of 2.2 million people killed in Belorussia was officially accepted and used for propaganda purposes (see e.g., I. Kravchenko, “Nemetsko-fashistskii okkupatsionnyi rezhim v Belorussii” in Nemetsko-fashistskii okkupatsionnyi rezhim (1941–1944), ed. Evgenii Boltin, et al. [Moscow: Izdatel’stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1965], 63). This number included 1,409,225 “peaceful inhabitants” and 810,091 Soviet prisoners of war. Not all of the latter had lived in Belorussia before the war. These numbers, which appeared originally in the report of the Extraordinary
Commission for the Investigation of the Crimes of the German-Fascist Occupiers for 1944, have been somewhat revised in the last decade by historians within and outside Belorussia. Belorussian historian Aleksei Litvin estimates the number of Belorussian losses at between 1.95 and 2 million. According to Litvin, this number includes Belorussians who perished in Belorussian territory, both at the front and in the course of forced labor in Germany. The author takes into consideration the fact that the census carried out in Belorussia in 1939, after the annexation of the western regions, was falsified: 2.9 million people were added “out of the blue sky.” See Aleksei Litvin, “K voprosu o kolichestve liudskikh poter’ Belorussi v gody Velikoi otechestvennoi voiny (1941–1945 gg.),” in Belorusu u XX stagodi, ed. Iakov Basin (Minsk, 2002), 1:136–37. In the 2002 edition of the study Zhertvy deukh diktatur, dealing with the tragic fate of Soviet forced laborers in the Third Reich, Pavel Palian quotes an Extraordinary Commission summary report dated March 1, 1946. The report detailed the losses in Belorussia for each of the twelve oblasts in existence at the time (after the war the Soviet Union transferred to Poland much of the prewar Białystok oblast as well as three raions of the Brest oblast; the remnants of the Białystok oblast were renamed Grodno oblast). According to this report, the number of “killed, tormented peaceful citizens” was 1,360,034, or 22.4 percent of the total Belorussian population. (Pavel Palian, Zhertvy deukh diktatur. Zhizn’, unizhenie i smert’ sovetskikh voennoplennykh i ostarbaiterov na chuzhbine i na rodine [Moscow: Rosspen, 2002], 11, 737.)


8. Iurii Turonak, Belarus’ pad nianecka akupatsiai (Minsk: Belarus, 1993), 198, quoting Narodnoe khoziaistvo belorusskoj SSR (Moscow: Gosudarstvennaia planovala kommissia, 1957), 14. Both Turonak and Nicholas Vakar, the author of the classic study of Belorussia, blame Soviet authorities at least as much as the Germans for the deliberate destruction of the Belorussian economy in the first weeks of operation Barbarossa. Turonak states explicitly that “the greatest destruction of Belorussian industry occurred as a result of the evacuation to the east of machines and equipment as well as the elimination by partisans of small enterprises at the periphery” (198). It is difficult to prove or disprove such statements.

9. Most of Nazi-occupied Belorussia was divided into the civil administration area, called Generalkommissariat (or Generalbezirk) Weißruthenien, which was part of Reichskommissariat Ostland, encompassing both Belorussia and the Baltic area, and the military administration area known as Rear Area Army Group Center (Rückwärtige Heeresgebiet Mitte). The borders between these two areas coincided roughly with the borders between Eastern and Western Belorussia before September 1939. In addition, the westernmost part of Belorussia, which encompassed the present-day Grodno and Brest oblasts, was established as the “Białystok district” (Bezirk Białystok) and annexed de facto to East Prussia. The southernmost part of present-day Belorussia, mainly the Polesie region, was attached to Reichskommissariat Ukraine and was divided into two Generalkommissariate: Zhitomir and Wólwanien-Podole, while the narrow strip in the north of Belorussia was added to Generalbezirk Litauen (Lithuania).


18. This was the case even in Jedwabne. See Gross, Neighbors, 37ff. Faye Schulman, who lived in Lenin, a small town near Pinsk (southern part of Belorussia), lost her entire family in the Holocaust at the age of sixteen and ultimately found her way to the partisans. In her memoir, she, too, stresses that in Lenin “Jews and gentiles lived in harmony with their neighbors” (A Partisan’s Memoir [Toronto: Second Story Press, 1995], 25). Similar evidence can be found in many other testimonies.


20. Quoted in Shalom Holavski (Cholawsky), Be-Sufat ha-Kilajon: Yahadut Byelorusyah ha-nizrahit be-Milhemet-ha-olam ha-sheniyah (Tel Aviv: Vered, 1988), 17.


24. Martin, Affirmative Action Empire, 43.

25. Ibid., 38f; testimony of Chaja Barshaj, Yad Vashem Archives (YVA), O. 3/5174.


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27. Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde*, 39. In his study, Gerlach relies on statistics from the so-called Wannsee Institute. Established in Berlin in the interwar period, this institute was made up largely of *émigrés* who had fled from Bolsheviks after November 1917. The Institute studied various aspects of life in the Soviet Union. During the Nazi period it came under the aegis of German intelligence, providing evaluations of the situation in both occupied and unoccupied territories of the Soviet Union. A brief discussion of the Institute may be found in Walter Schellenberg’s memoirs. (*Memuary* [Minsk: Rodiola-Plus, 1998], 266–67.)


32. The NKVD, or the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs, was responsible for security measures and was the primary agency of the Great Terror of the 1930s and 1940s.


35. According to Pavel Polian, at the beginning of April 1941, 59,000 Jews constituting 33.3 percent of the total number of so-called Polish “special settlers” were deported from the annexed Polish territories. (This number does not include the “settlers” deported to Kazakhstan, Krasnoiarsk territory, and Vologda oblast.) See: Pavel Polian, *Ne po svoei vole: Istorii i geografiia prinuditel’nykh migratsii v SSSR* (Moscow: O.G.I.; Memorial, 2001), 98. According to an earlier study by Ben-Cion Pinchuk, who quotes documents of the Polish Government-in-Exile, Jews constituted 30 percent of the deportees from Western Belorussia and Western Ukraine. See Pinchuk, *Shtetl Jews*, 39.

36. Pohl, “Der Mörderische Sommer.”

37. See for example the testimony of Chaja Bielski, member of Bielski partisan unit, quoted in Nechama Tec, *Defiance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 15.


39. According to the Polish Government-in-Exile, the total number of deportees from Western Belorussia and Western Ukraine was around 800,000. This number can be found in the so-called “Sikorski files” (Pinchuk, *Shtetl Jews*, 10). Polian claims that the total number of deportees from the western regions of the USSR after the annexation of these regions in 1939 and 1940 was 380–390 thousand. He cites an earlier study by V. Parsadanova dealing with deportations from Western Belorussia and Western Ukraine. According to Parsadanova, as many as 1,173,170 people were deported from these territories alone between 1939 and 1941. Questions about the reasons for such discrepancies remain. Polian, *Ne po svoei vole*, 102. The most recent statistics on the deportations have been published by Russian scholar Alexander Gurjanov, according to whom the total number of deportees from the former Eastern Poland between


41. Rozenblat, “Evrei v sisteme mezhnatsional’nykh otnoshenii.”

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid.

44. This was the case in the city of David-Horodok. See Cholawsky, The Jews of Bielorussia, 13.

45. Rozenblat, “Evrei v sisteme mezhnatsional’nykh otnoshenii.”

46. It is very difficult to establish the exact number of Belorussian Jews who perished in the Holocaust. An additional difficulty lies in the fact that many researchers until recently have treated Eastern and Western Belorussia separately. According to Leonid Smilovitsky, between 245,000 and one million Jews fell victim to the Nazi genocide in Belorussia. See his “Die Partizipation der Juden am Leben der Belarussischen Sozialistischen Sowjetrepublik (BSSR) im ersten Nachkriegsjahrzehnt, 1944–1954,” in “Existiert das Ghetto noch?” Weißrussland: Jüdisches Überleben gegen nationalsozialistische Herrschaft, ed. Projektgruppe Belarus (Berlin: Assoziation A, 2003), 377. According to Enzyklopädie des Holocaust, on the eve of German-Soviet war, more than a million Jews lived in the two parts of Belorussia, while in the first postwar census only 150,000 were registered. (Here, however, we must take into account those Jews who left Belorussia for various reasons as well as those who returned after Soviet evacuation.) See “Weißrußland” in Israel Gutman et al., eds., Enzyklopädie des Holocaust (Berlin: Argon, 1993), 3:1559–60, 1562. Similar numbers can be found in Bernhard Chiari’s study. According to Chiari, of 820,000 Belorussian Jews, only 120,000–150,000 survived the war (see his Alltag hinter der Front [Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 1998], 231). It is also worth noting that in his report to the Wannsee Conference, Adolf Eichmann set the number of Belorussian Jews (without Bezirk Białystok) who were still living at the beginning of 1942 and were destined for extermination at 446,484. See “Minutes of the Wannsee Conference” on the website http://www.prorev.com/wannsee.html.


50. The problem of personnel shortages was not limited to occupied Belorussia. As Dieter Pohl has stressed, the Germans faced the same problem in Galicia (Western Ukraine) and the General Government. See his “The Murder of Jews in the General Government,” in National Socialist Extermination Policies, ed. Ulrich Herbert (New York: Berghahn Books, 1999), 241, 91.

51. See Gerlach, Kalkulierte Morde, 215.


54. The Bialystok area now belonging to Poland was made part of the BSSR as a result of the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact. Thus technically Jedwabne, too, was part of Belorussia. Moreover, the massacre in Jedwabne was not an isolated instance. Massacres of Jews carried out by non-Jews with minimal (if any) participation by Germans also occurred in places such as Radziłów (July 7, 1941; 800–1,500 victims), Grajewo (July 1941, some 100 victims), and Łomża. Gross describes the pogrom in Radziłów in *Neighbors* (57–68).


56. Pohl shows that, first, in many cases pogroms were carried out in areas where no NKVD mass shootings had taken place. Second, no perpetrators of “NKVD crimes” were caught during the pogroms. Third, among the victims of anti-Jewish violence during the early days of the occupation were many Jews who had never occupied positions of authority under the Soviets. Dieter Pohl, *Nationalsozialistische Judentötung in Ostgalizien 1941–1944* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1997), 55–56.

57. The reports note a difference in attitude toward the invaders between Western Belorussia, which was annexed to the Soviet Union only in 1939, and the old Soviet territories. See Tätigkeits- und Lagebericht (TLB-L. R.) Nr. 1, der Einsatzgruppen der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD in der UdSSR, 31.7.41, in Klein, *Die Einsatzgruppen*, 125; TLB Nr. 2, (29.7.–14.8.41), in ibid., 136–37, 146. See also: Operational Situation Report No. 1, 2.7.41, in Y. Arad, et al, *The Einsatzgruppen Reports*, 2.

58. Literally “village elders,” the lowest level of the so-called “local self-administration” in the occupied Soviet territories. A description of the responsibilities of the Dorfälteste and of other local office-holders can be found in a draft of summary report of the German military administration for the occupied Soviet territories. See Rohentwurf des Abschlußberichts über die Tätigkeit der Militärverwaltung im Operationsgebiet des Ostens, Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv (Freiburg i. Breisgau, Germany), (BA-MA), RH 22/215, pp. 36–46.


60. See Operational Situation Report USSR No. 43, 5.8.41, in Arad, et al., *The Einsatzgruppen Reports*, 68.

61. Perhaps the most extreme example of such views is Wiktor Ostrowski’s work, *Antisemitism in Byelorussia and its Origin: Material for Historical Research and Study of the Subject* (London: Byelorussian Central Council, 1960). In the last, brief chapter of his book, Ostrowski states: “Naturally, the local population took no part in these actions, on the contrary . . . the Byelorussian
and Ukrainian local population met with the same fate as the Jews, though on a smaller scale” (65). Ostrowski was the son of Radaslav Astroński, the President of the Belorussian Central Council, which the Germans created during the final stages of their occupation of Belorussia.

62. Oberst Klepsch über die Schutzmannschaften: Protokoll über die Tagung der GKFW Funktionären, 8.4–10.4.43, Bundesarchiv (Berlin) (BA) R 93/20, p. 149.


66. Quoted in Dean, Collaboration in the Holocaust, 52.

67. TLB Nr.1, 31.7.41, in Klein, Die Einsatzgruppen, 116.


69. Leonid Smilovitskii (Smilovitsky), Katastrofa evreev v Belorussii 1941–1944 (Tel Aviv: Biblioteka Matveia Chernogo), 63.

70. Lapidus, “Nas Malo.”


75. On Minsk, see the testimony of Hanna Rubinchik, 22.2.44, and the order regarding creation of the Jewish ghetto in Minsk, both in YVA M 41/112. On Borisov, see Lofus, Belarus Secret, 25–26; On Stolbtsy, see the file on Jan Awdziej, SWCA.

76. Dan Zhits, Getto Minsk veteledotav le’or hate’ud hadash (Ramat Gan: Finkler Institute for Holocaust Studies, Bar-Ilan University, 2000), 18. I am grateful to Professor Dan Michman for drawing my attention to this study.

77. File on Jan Awdziej, SWCA.

78. Testimony of Hanna Rubinchik.


80. Testimony of Hanna Rubinchik.

81. Stanislav Stankievich: general information, and list of the Nazi collaborators who, after the war, found refuge in the United States, both in SWCA; Letter of Novo-Borisov Police Chief Mironchik to the administration of the Borisov police, 6.09.41, YVA M 41/2396. The original is
located in the State Archive of the Minsk Oblast, GAMO, 635–1-31), l. 22. Loftus, Belarus Secret, 25–28. See also materials from the KGB interrogation of David Egof, YVA M 41/119. The original is located in the KGB archives. After the war, Egof testified before Soviet interrogators that he had participated in the killings.


83. See the entry on Stankevich in Solov’ev, Belarusskaia tsentral’naia rada: Sozdanie, deiatel’nost’, krakh (Minsk: Navuka i Tekhnika, 1995), 172. Before 1939, Stankevich was active in the Belorussian national movement in Polish territory.

84. Materials from the KGB interrogation of David Egof, YVA M 41/119.


86. Not to be confused with the Jewish Police in the ghettos, which was also referred to as Ordnungsdienst or Order Service.

87. Gerlach, Kalkulierte Morde, 204.

88. The growth of the partisan movement in Nazi-occupied Soviet territories also led to Hitler’s War Directive no. 46, which expanded local auxiliary forces. An English translation of the directive can be found in Matthew Cooper, The Nazi War against Soviet Partisans, 1941–1944 (New York: Stein and Day, 1979), 176–78.

89. The Moscow offensive and Hitler’s later decision to shift the main thrust of the war against the Soviet Union to the south led to a withdrawal of a considerable part of the forces from Rear Area, Army Group Center. See Beurteilung der Lage in Heeresgebiet Mitte, 31.5.42, BA-MA RH 22/231, p. 270. On the strength of German occupying troops in Belorussia see Gerlach, Kalkulierte Morde, 214ff. Gerlach maintains, however, that the German forces’ relatively weak coverage of Belorussian territory was not connected to the hostilities on the Eastern Front, but was rather the result of deliberate prewar planning.

90. See for example the report of Chief Bakhanovich of the local police of the city Novo-Borisov to the administrative department of the raion administration regarding the arrests by the order police (OD) of Novo-Borisov, 27.8.41, YVA M 41/2396, pp. 6–7.

91. Order of Commander Kovalevskii of the Borisov OD to the commander of the Novo-Borisov OD, 26.08.41, ibid., pp. 8–9.


93. This was the case for example in Borisov. See the materials from the KGB interrogation of David Egof, YVA M 41/119.

94. Rufeisen later converted to Christianity. He died in 1998 at the Carmelite monastery in Haifa, Israel.


109. Testimony of H. Vainer, survivor of the Krinek ghetto, YVA 0.33/287.

110. Testimony of Lev Lanski, former inmate of Trostenets concentration camp, undated, YVA M 41/100.


113. While there is no lack of vivid descriptions of orgies of lootings following the Aktionen (see for example Smilovitskii, *Katastrofa evreev v Belorussii*, 97–98), the scope of the misappropriation of Jewish property by local populations and local collaborationist bodies has not
been analyzed sufficiently. For example, Yitzhak Arad’s article “Plunder of Jewish Property in the Nazi-Occupied Areas of the Soviet Union” (Yad Vashem Studies 29 [2001]: 109–48) concentrates mainly on the role of the German occupying bodies in the misappropriation of Jewish property and treats the role of the local collaborationist bodies only fragmentarily. The same can be said of Christian Gerlach’s study Kalkulierte Morde (675–83). Gerlach examines the question of Jewish property in the general context of German economic policy in Belorussia, and tends to see in the confiscations—particularly of apartments and their subsequent transfer to local non-Jews—an effort to resolve economic problems. In fact, the needs of local population were far from the top priority of the bodies responsible for allocation of housing.

114. TLB Nr. 11, 1.3.-31.3.42, in Klein, Die Einsatzgruppen, 308.

115. Smilovitskii, Katastrofa evreev v Belorussii, 95.

116. Abschrift von Aktenvermerk des Stadtinspektors Loebel und Reichsangestellten Plenske, 16.11.42, YVA M 41/291. The original is located in the State Archive of Belorussia, 370–1-486(21).

117. Schreiben Gemeindevorstehers von Sanochwaloitschi Wasilev an die Minsker Rayonverwaltung, 1941, YVA M 41/290. The original is located in the State Archive of Belorussia, 393–3–16), pp. 9, 11.

118. See Abschrift von Aktenvermerk.


121. Abschrift von Aktenvermerk.

122. Chiari, Alltag hinter der Front, 183–84.

123. See testimony of Hanna Rubinchik.


125. Instruction of city commandant’s office in Bobruisk to the city and raion Bürgermeistern regarding Jewish property, 19.12.41, YVA M 41/273, p. 1. The original is located in the State Archive, Mogilev 858–1–19.

126. The total income of the Mogilev “city management” decreased between May 1 and June 1, 1942, while income from the sales of the Jewish property increased in the same period. See: Report of the Mogilev City Financial Department for May 1942 and for June 1942, YVA M 41/272, pp. 1–2. The original is located in the State Archive, Mogilev, 260–1–45, p. 59.


129. Report of Bakhanovich to Stankevich, 28.08.41, ibid., p. 11.

130. Stankevich’s letter to the head of Borisov OD Kovalevsky and to the head of Novo-Borisov OD Bakhanovich, 7.7.42, M 41/2395. The original is located in GAMO, 635–1-4, p. 2.


132. Ibid., p. 3

133. Testimony of Vladimir Kovachenok, 26.2.44, YVA M 41/2836. The original is located in the KGB archives.

134. This body was created at the end of 1943 on the orders of Generalkommissar für Weißruthenien Curt von Gottberg, who occupied the post after Kube’s assassination. Its mission was to assist the Germans in mobilizing the local population for anti-partisan struggle. Despite its complex structure, the Belorussian Central Council exercised authority only in a narrow area.


136. Chiari, Alltag hinter der Front, 259.

137. Ibid., 119–20.

138. Ibid., 262–63.

139. Ibid., 5–6.