

*Auxiliary Police Units in the Occupied Soviet Union, 1941-43: A Case Study of  
the Holocaust in Gomel, Belarus*

“...the corpses lay with their faces on the dirt. Hands on their heads. One woman lay in a way that showed she had been kneeling, and she fell over her baby. There were four identifiable corpses that revealed a bloody wound on their heads. It was established that they were not old bullet wounds, but it was clear that they and the baby had been murdered; with what extraneous object remains unclear. It was clear that people had been beaten with heavy objects and had then been (disorderly dumped) in a hole. One boy had clearly been buried alive. The corpses were in underwear, without clothes.”<sup>1</sup>

This statement, given by Ivan Abramovich on January 16, 1944, was part of the ‘Soviet Extraordinary State Commission to Investigate Fascist Crimes Committed by the Invaders and their Accomplices on Soviet Territory’ during an investigation of German crimes in Gomel, Belorussia. The Soviet regime conducted similar investigations and hearings throughout areas formerly occupied by the Germans in an effort to understand precisely what horrors had occurred beyond the front lines. As the investigations progressed, they learned that the scope of the crimes was tremendously large. Even more disturbing, however, was the discovery that locals across Lithuania, Belorussia and Ukraine were deeply implicated, principally through service in auxiliary police units that openly collaborated with the German forces and participated in atrocities at almost every level.

Without the auxiliaries, the Nazi’s murderous intentions toward the Jewish population on the Eastern Front would not have been nearly as deadly; the role of the auxiliary police was pivotal in the Holocaust on the Eastern Front, as they provided support, manpower and critical knowledge of the local region and language to the German forces. From 1941-1943, local men in Belorussia, Ukraine and Lithuania

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<sup>1</sup> Testimony given by Ivan Abramovich regarding the excavation of a mass grave in Gomel, Belorussia. Gomel Oblast Archives. RG53.005M, Reel #1, Fond 1345, Opis 2 Folder 7. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, D.C. (Translated by the author and hereafter cited as Gomel MMS).

willingly volunteered to serve in units that aided in ghettoizing, depriving, robbing and in certain cases, ultimately murdering their Jewish neighbors; they were not forced into these roles, but chose to of their own free will. While various factors such as the Stalinist purges, collectivization and uncertainty during a time of war played a nominal role in why men joined, the main motivation was actually quite simple: pure opportunism. The opportunity to maintain a steady source of income during the German occupation (with the added possibility of profiting from Jewish belongings), proved too strong for some to ignore, and as a result, mankind's tremendous capacity for human cruelty and exploitation assisted in the execution of over two million Jews on the Eastern Front. However, the reluctance of the countries of the former Soviet Union to confront the true role of the auxiliaries has consequently led to a huge gap in the historiography of the Holocaust, promoting a generic public memory that fails to acknowledge the murderously collaborative role of the auxiliary police within their own countries during World War II.

This paper considers the place of local auxiliary police in the historiography of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union. The German strategic goals that necessitated the use of auxiliaries are examined, as is an overview of the German police structure on the Eastern Front. The character of civilian collaboration in Belorussia is discussed via an exploration of the various motives for individuals to join the auxiliaries, as well as a study of the organizational structure of the units themselves. Records from the 'Soviet Extraordinary State Commission to Investigate Fascist Crimes Committed by the Invaders and their Accomplices on Soviet Territory' from the *oblast* of Gomel, Belorussia serve as an intimate case study of local collaboration while depicting the readiness with which the native police enforced and carried out brutal policies at the local

level. Finally, a lack of information on the subject within the historiography, combined with the strong role of public memory, has increased the difficulty of confronting the issue of local collaboration in the Holocaust in the Soviet Union; the tendency countries have exhibited of sweeping the role of auxiliaries into historical oblivion is ultimately cautioned.

### *Collaboration as a Historiographical Problem*

John Loftus served as a federal prosecutor in the Office of Special investigations of the Criminal Division of the U.S. Justice Department in the 1980s and noted that, “the Holocaust in Belorussia was unique. In no other nation under German occupation did the inhabitants so willingly and enthusiastically visit such a large degree of inhumanity upon their neighbors.”<sup>2</sup> This statement, however, raises the question of how historians determine what was inhumanity, what was collaboration, and what was simply survival when considering civilian collaboration on the Eastern Front.

At the lowest level of collaboration, many Belorussians willingly told the Germans who was Jewish and Communist; the Germans called this “revealing the concealment of their former oppressors” and fully exploited the locals’ knowledge of individuals and terrain.<sup>3</sup> According to the Russian Federal Security Service, between

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Leonid Rein, “Local Collaboration in the Execution of the “Final Solution” in Nazi-Occupied Belorussia.” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 20 (2006): 381-409, 382. It is important to note that the cases of Lithuania and Ukraine were equally violent, if not more so, than in Belorussia. The Germans easily incited pogroms in Lithuania and there were cases where Jews were publicly clubbed to death in front of cheering crowds with the entire thing a spectacle. Lithuania and Ukraine also had highly active auxiliary police units; documentary evidence shows that they, more so than their Belorussian counterparts, actively participated in the actual executions of Jews. See Ernst Klee, Willi Dressen and Volker Riess, eds., *The Good Old Days’: The Holocaust as Seen by its Perpetrators and Bystanders*. (New York: Konecky and Konecky, 1988), 28.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Leonid Rein, “Local Collaboration,” 390.

1943-1953 more than 320,000 Soviet citizens were arrested in the Soviet Union for collaboration with the Germans.<sup>4</sup>

Misappropriation of Jewish property also must be considered in the spectrum of collaboration; many testimonies confirmed that bystanders would assemble with their wheelbarrows on the streets outside of the town ghetto, waiting for the massacre to wind up so they could pilfer the Jews' belongings.<sup>5</sup> While there is clear evidence that the local and German policemen regularly looted Jews' property, the fact that ordinary citizens also took such advantage underscores the unethical, opportunistic environment that pervaded the region as a result of the difficulty of the war. One account from the Vitebsk region of Belorussia recounts how the Germans piled all of the Jewish possessions in a large heap following the executions and tasked one soldier with the role of an auctioneer. "The soldier would pick a sheet or pillow out of the heap and call out, 'Who wants it?' The peasants would try to shout each other down, shouting, 'Me, sir! Me, sir!'"<sup>6</sup> Considering the vast toll of the war and occupation, Leonid Rein cautiously argues that the majority of Eastern Belorussian collaboration and misappropriation was largely caused by opportunism rather than any other factor.<sup>7</sup> A more explicit mode of collaboration was the 'local self-administration' wherein local *Burgermeistern* (mayors) played key roles in enabling the execution process, especially regarding the establishment

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<sup>4</sup> Tanja Penter, "Collaboration on Trial: New Source Material on Soviet Postwar Trials against Collaborators." *Slavic Review*, 64 (Winter 2005):782-790, 783. It is important to note that the Soviet view was twofold in regards to collaboration immediately after the war: 'collaborator' or 'resistor' were the only identifications made. The Soviets even considered those who had been requisitioned (by threat of death), to help the Germans as 'collaborators.' Penter warns historians from categorizing in the same manner; she concludes that the reality of the situation was much more complex, and that 'collaboration,' 'resistance,' and 'forced labor' were actually intricately related and should be studied together, rather than as separate phenomena.

<sup>5</sup> Leonid Rein, "Local Collaboration," 396.

<sup>6</sup> Zvi Gitelman, ed. *Bitter Legacy: Confronting the Holocaust in the USSR*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 249.

<sup>7</sup> Leonid Rein, "Local Collaboration," 399.

of ghettos. They knew which neighborhoods were the poorest and thus ‘best suited’ to house Jews. Some city councils retained direct control of the municipal areas in question; the rapid ghettoization of target populations throughout Belorussia by autumn of 1941 testifies to the active role of the local administration in the process.<sup>8</sup>

Additionally, wherever there was evidence of a Jewish massacre, there was further evidence of active participation of auxiliary police units, which spanned a wide range of duties. Frequently, local police enforced racial policies, such as forcing Jews to wear yellow patches, resettling them to the ghettos, rounding up Jews from their homes and transporting them to killing sites, guarding the sites during the execution; many even participated in the executions themselves.<sup>9</sup> Despite the common misconception that executioners were often ‘ordered to shoot or be shot,’ there is almost no evidence to support this allegation; in fact, one auxiliary noted that “It was made clear to us that we could refuse to obey an order to participate in the *Sonderaktionen* [special actions] without adverse consequences.”<sup>10</sup> Clearly, those who decided not to participate were free to do so; given that the auxiliary units were volunteer organizations, it is reasonable to argue that the men who participated in the executions did so of their own accord.

Separate from the willing volunteers were villagers who were forced by the Germans to assist with the executions in some manner. According to Fr. Patrick Debois, a French priest whose research has primarily focused on gathering evidence and interviewing elderly Ukrainians who witnessed the Nazi atrocities, in his interviews with elderly Ukrainians he found many young children who had been threatened at gunpoint

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<sup>8</sup> Leonid Rein, “Local Collaboration,” 390.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 393.

<sup>10</sup> Ernst Klee, *The Good Old Days*, 76.

by the Germans and told, “Come with me, and bring a spade.”<sup>11</sup> Those ‘requisitioned’ were forced to dig the pits wherein executed Jews were interred, pack the space around the bodies with sand or dirt after each round of shooting, scatter chlorine and ash to stem the blood flowing from the pits, and sometimes, pull out gold teeth with pincers. One elderly woman, Petrivna from Ternivka, told Fr. Debois how she had been a ‘packer:’ “After every volley of shots...we were three Ukrainian girls who, in our bare feet, had to pack down the bodies of the Jews and throw a fine layer of sand on top of them so that the other Jews could lay down...Many Jews were only wounded...we had trouble walking on them.”<sup>12</sup> Anonymous laborers from every town were forcibly involved in nearly all stages of the execution: digging pits, packing bodies, and even banging saucepans to drown out the screaming during the executions. Their involvement is just now being examined more in-depth by historians.

### ***German War Aims and Local Collaboration***

Vital to comprehending why such high levels of local collaboration occurred is a basic understanding of German war aims on the Eastern Front: simply stated, Nazi Germany’s overarching strategic goal in the Soviet Union was to conquer a vast *Lebensraum*, or living space, for German colonization in the East and to serve as the demographic basis for a thousand-year civilization.<sup>13</sup> Fundamental to this objective was

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<sup>11</sup> Patrick Debois, *The Holocaust by Bullets*. (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 75.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 4. For a comprehensive analysis of Operation Barbarossa and the ‘Final Solution’ see David Cesarani, ed., *The Final Solution: Origins and Implementation*; Alan Clark, *Barbarossa: The Russian-German Conflict, 1941-1945*; Yitzhak Arad, Yisrael Gutman and Abraham Margalio, eds., *Documents on the Holocaust: Selected Sources on the Destruction of the Jews of Germany, Austria, Poland, and the Soviet Union*; Tobias Jersak, “Blitzkrieg Revisited: A New Look at Nazi War and Extermination Planning”; Gabriel Gorodetsky, *Grand Delusion: Stalin and the German Invasion of Russia*; Christopher Browning

Hitler's visceral hatred of 'Judeo-Bolshevism,' combined with his racial contempt for the region's native Slavic peoples and their punitive Jewish 'overlords.' Consequently, the proposed method of purging the problem was the destruction of native communities through a brutal 'war of annihilation,' a style of warfare in which the abject destruction of the enemy was the central operational and strategic objective, instead of a means to other ends. The doctrine of annihilation pervaded the ranks of both the *Wehrmacht* (German armed forces), and the *SS Einsatzgruppen* (special task forces), and distinguished the orientation of German forces from that of almost every other military in the modern world.<sup>14</sup>

This indoctrination is evident in Field Marshal Walther von Reichenau's infamous 1941 operational order to the Sixth Army, which read that, "The most essential aim of the war against the Jewish-Bolshevistic system is the complete destruction of their...power...Therefore, the soldier must have full understanding for the necessity of severe but just revenge on subhuman Jewry."<sup>15</sup> Similarly, General Erich von Manstein, Commander of the 56<sup>th</sup> *Panzer* Corps, wrote, "More strongly than in Europe, [Jewry] holds all the key positions in the political leadership and administration...the Jewish-

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and Jürgen Matthäus, *The Origins of the Final Solution: The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy, September 1939-March 1941*; Theo Schulte, *The German Army and Nazi Policies in Occupied Russia*; Raoul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*; Edward B Westermann, *Hitler's Police Battalions: Enforcing Racial War in the East*; Ben Shepherd, *War in the Wild East: The German Army and Soviet Partisans*; Richard Breitman, *The Architect of Genocide: Himmler and the Final Solution*.

<sup>14</sup> 'SS,' is the abbreviation for *Schutzstaffel* (German for the 'Protective Echelon'), the Nazi paramilitary force which started in 1925 as Hitler's personal bodyguards. Under Heinrich Himmler, the force grew from 300 to over 50,000 members. The *Einsatzgruppen* was Reinhard Heydrich's organization within the SS. Known as 'death squads,' the *Einsatzgruppen* were specifically tasked with eliminating the 'Jewish threat' in the occupied territories. See Richard Rhodes, *Masters of Death: The SS-Einsatzgruppen and the Invention of the Holocaust*. (New York: A.A. Knopf, 2002).

<sup>15</sup>Quoted in Zvi Gitelman. *Bitter Legacy*, 16. Field Marshal Walther von Reichenau commanded the 6<sup>th</sup> Army during the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941.

Bolshevist system must be exterminated once and for all. The soldier must appreciate the necessity for harsh punishment of Jewry, the spiritual bearer of the Bolshevist terror.”<sup>16</sup>

During the initial planning sessions for Operation Barbarossa in March 1941, *Reichsführer SS* Heinrich Himmler was given control of certain “...special tasks [that] arise from the final struggle between two opposing political systems.”<sup>17</sup> Likewise, Reinhard Heydrich and General Eduard Wagner determined that ‘special detachments’ of Security Police and SD would carry out ‘special tasks’ within the army’s zone of operations... [including] securing...important individuals (leading émigrés, saboteurs, terrorists, etc).”<sup>18</sup> Further SS guidelines printed in late July 1941 after a meeting between Wagner and Heydrich stated that, “By agreement with the Army High Command...the task of Security Police *Einsatzcommandos* is combating all elements in foreign territory and behind the fighting troops that are hostile to the Reich and German people.”<sup>19</sup> In the coming months, this meant that the execution of the Jews was within the realm of the *Einsatzgruppen*’s duties. Heydrich’s original guidelines for Higher SS and Police Leaders in the occupied territories of the Soviet Union, written on 2 July 1941, stipulate that, “Officials of the Comintern, top and medium-level officials and radical, lower-level members of the Party along with all Commissars and Jews in the Party and State employment,” were to be executed.<sup>20</sup>

Far from merely being a pillar of the Nazi party, this ideological and racialist mindset pervaded the upper-echelons of the *Wehrmacht* officer-corps and trickled down

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<sup>16</sup> Zvi Gitelman. *Bitter Legacy*, 16. General Erich von Manstein commanded the 56<sup>th</sup> Panzer Corps in 1941 during Operation Barbarossa.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Geoffrey Megargee, *War of Annihilation: Combat and Genocide on the Eastern Front, 1941*. (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006), 35.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 36. General Eduard Wagner oversaw all army supply and rear-area security operations.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>20</sup> Extract from Guidelines by Heydrich for Higher SS and Police Leaders in the Occupied Territories of the Soviet Union, July 2, 1941. 0-4/53-1. Yad Vashem Archives, Israel.

to the lowest levels of the military, justifying harsh measures against the population of the occupied areas in terms of ‘military necessity’ rather than adherence to international laws of war.<sup>21</sup> A document entitled “Guidelines for the Behavior of Troops in Russia” stated that the battle against Bolshevism “demands ruthless and energetic action against Bolshevik agitators, saboteurs, and Jews and the total elimination of all active or passive resistance.”<sup>22</sup> Following the printing of this document, General Erich Hoepner of Armored Group 4 issued an order to his troops in May, 1941 that stated:

[The war against Russia] is the old fight of the Germans against the Slavs, the defense of European culture against the Moscovite-Asiatic flood, the repulsion of Jewish Bolshevism. The goal of this fight must be the destruction of contemporary Russia and therefore must be conducted with enormous violence. Every combat action, in its conception and conduct, must be governed by an iron will to pitiless and complete annihilation of the enemy. In particular there is no mercy for the carriers of the current Russian-Bolshevik system.<sup>23</sup>

These measures were, at times, carried out by the *Wehrmacht*, but more often that not they were under the jurisdiction of the police. “The investigation of and struggle against tendencies and elements hostile to the Reich (Communists, Jews, etc.)...is in the occupied areas, exclusively the task of the *Sonderkommando* of the Security Police and the SD...” wrote von Rundstedt.<sup>24</sup> In addition to the *Einsatzgruppen* (Security Police), *Feldgendarmarie* (military police), *Geheime Feldpolizei* (Secret Field Police) and *Ordnungspolizei* (Order Police) were all stationed in the rear areas, and closely coordinated with the army to ensure operational success and regional security throughout the vast territory.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Geoffrey Megargee, *War*, 7.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>24</sup> Wehrmacht and the Einsatzgruppen Aktionen, September 1941, by von Rundstedt. NOKW-541. Yad Vashem Archives, Israel.

<sup>25</sup> Geoffrey Megargee, *War*, 14.

The SS operated only in two of the three designated zones: the Army Rear Area and the Army Group Rear Area. While they would follow closely behind the front units to ensure that their targets were caught, they were never intended to be on the front lines. Additionally, the army group rear commanders were in charge of Security Divisions (SD), and Secret Field Police Units, an arrangement which satisfied the army, maintained more efficient lines of communication and supply, and ensured that occupied territories yielded labor and supplies for the forces.<sup>26</sup>

The rear area of Army Group Center consisted of approximately fifty-six thousand square miles, a huge area requiring vast support from various army, SS and local units.<sup>27</sup> In autumn of 1941, partisan activity began to increase and the Germans turned their full fury to the Jews. While the number of Jews that fell into the hands of the *Einsatzgruppen* had decreased (mainly due to geographic considerations and the fact that the largest concentration of Jews lived in the western regions of the Soviet Union and approximately 1.5 million Jews in the eastern regions managed to escape) mass killings persisted throughout the autumn.<sup>28</sup> On October 10, General von Reichenau issued the following order:

The most important goal of the campaign against the Jewish-Bolshevik system is the complete crushing of the instruments of power and the eradication of the Asiatic influence in the European cultural sphere.

In this connection there also exist *tasks* for the troops that extend beyond the traditional one-dimensional soldierly identity. In the east the soldier is not only a fighter according to the rules of warfare, but also the carrier of an inexorable racial idea and the avenger of all bestialities that were inflicted upon German and related races. Therefore the soldier must have *full* understanding for the necessity of harsh but just punishment of the Jewish sub-humans. It has the broader objective of nipping in the bud any uprisings in the *Wehrmacht's* rear, which experience shows, have always been instigated by the Jews.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Geoffrey Megargee, *War*, 37.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

To eradicate this putative threat, the Germans desperately needed locals to fill leadership positions along the vast front, and they were not disappointed. Many stepped forward to identify local Jews and Communists and were rewarded for their assistance by the Germans.<sup>30</sup> By the end of July 1941, a majority of the western occupied zones had transitioned from a military to civil administration, and Himmler issued orders to establish indigenous police units, or *Schutzmannschaft*, directly subordinate to the German police.<sup>31</sup>

Heinrich Lohse, the *Reichskommissar* for *Ostland* (the Baltic states and Western Belorussia), issued provisional directives on 13 August 1941 to guide policy toward Jews under his domain. He stipulated that they were to be registered (and could be turned in by “reliable local residents” as well), identify themselves by wearing a yellow star and were banned from changing their place of residence. Additionally, Lohse wrote that:

The countryside is to be cleansed of Jews...As far as possible the Jews are to be concentrated in cities or in sections of large cities, where the population is already predominantly Jewish. There, ghettos are to be established, and the Jews are to be prohibited from leaving these ghettos...The external hermetic sealing of the ghetto is to be carried out by auxiliary police drawn from the local population.<sup>32</sup>

### *The Use of Auxiliary Forces*

The task of the cleansing operations themselves fell mainly on the police battalions; eleven Order Police battalions in addition to other SS units were sent to the east in July 1941, and the Germans began recruiting thousands of locals across the occupied territory

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<sup>30</sup> Monetary rewards were given out in return for information regarding the whereabouts of Jews. See Martin Dean, *Collaboration in the Holocaust: Crimes of the Local Police in Belorussia and the Ukraine, 1941-1944*. (New York: St. Martins Press, 2000), 38.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>32</sup> Provisional Directives by Lohse, Reichskommissar for Ostland, Concerning the Treatment of the Jews. PS-1138. Yad Vashem Archives, Israel.

as auxiliaries.<sup>33</sup> These were needed because, as Kurt Daluege noted, to address the extensive shortage of German manpower on the Eastern Front: “auxiliary forces from the occupied territories had to be included and organized, trained, and equipped for the fulfillment of police tasks.”<sup>34</sup> Heavy losses already on the Eastern Front meant that the military required constant reinforcement. For example, in the summer of 1941 the commander of Rear Area, Army Group Center had up to six divisions at his disposal for ‘cleansing operations;’ only three months later, he had four.<sup>35</sup>

In areas of German control under civil rather than military administration, auxiliary police units were termed *Schutzmannschaft* and placed under the control of the German police to which they acted as unofficial support.<sup>36</sup> Under military jurisdiction (as was the case in Eastern Belorussia), auxiliaries were termed *Ordnungsdienst* (Order Service).<sup>37</sup> Each auxiliary battalion was under the leadership of a German officer.

Recruitment to local police units was initially voluntary in the days following the invasion. While anti-Semitism certainly existed in the Soviet Union (especially in Belorussia and Ukraine, where Jews were perceived as Soviet accomplices), it was not a prerequisite for entry to the police force. More so, if it is critical to highlight the prominent role of anti-Semitism, crudely understood, in the motivations of perpetrators, then it is no less critical to emphasize the ambiguous nature of the term and the presence of a range of other important motivations. The importance of anti-Semitism as a

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<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Geoffrey Megargee, *War*, 53. For more information on the Order Police, see Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*. (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993).

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Edward B. Westerman, *Hitler's Police Battalion: Enforcing Racial War in the East*. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 196. Kurt Daluege was the head of the Order Police in the occupied territories.

<sup>35</sup> Leonid Rein, “Local Collaboration,” 389.

<sup>36</sup> Yohoshua Buchler, “Local Police Force Participation in the Extermination of Jews in Occupied Soviet Territory”. *Shevut* 4 (1996):79-99, 81.

<sup>37</sup> Leonid Rein, “Local Collaboration,” 393.

motivation for collaboration (of any sort) is nearly impossible to quantify; while complex inter-ethnic relations were common throughout Belorussia, there is no hard data to indicate the numbers of collaborators with anti-Semitic sentiments. Moreover, anti-Semitism as a motivation for collaboration was never mentioned in any of the trials in the Soviet Union in the post-war period; in fact, in her analysis of Soviet postwar collaborator trials, Tanja Penter found that even the term 'anti-Semitism' was never mentioned.<sup>38</sup>

Besides the ideological appeal of the auxiliary units (as a chance for personal 'revenge' against the Soviets after Stalin's harsh collectivization policies), additional incentives for membership were the prospect of guaranteed food and a steady paycheck. One member of the police recounted that, "I haven't got a lump of bread, I have joined the police service to feed my children."<sup>39</sup> Further, rewards could be had for "exceptional achievement on behalf of the German interests."<sup>40</sup> For the greedier and more ambitious police, this prospect encouraged acts of violence against Jews, and opportunism turned them into "real beasts." Some members who were not anti-Semitic joined out of the expectation that the Germans would eventually be victorious and hoped for corresponding rewards.<sup>41</sup> Martin Dean has concluded that while an anti-Semitic attitude was present in the region and certainly, to some extent, a factor, more commonplace

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<sup>38</sup> Tanja Penter, "Collaboration on Trial", 785. For more on anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union, see Daniel Romanovsky's "Nazi Occupation in Northeastern Belarus and Western Russia" in Zvi Gittelman, *Bitter Legacy*, 230-252. While Romanovsky acknowledges that anti-Semitism certainly existed, it was more of a "general ethical backwardness" and that Russians simply were not affected by the deaths of those in a different ethnic group from themselves. He quotes one elderly woman whom he interviewed: "How were the Jews shot? Well, what's there to tell about? They were shot, that's all." (pp 241). Many civilians in the occupied countries initially welcomed the Germans after the harshness of Soviet rule, which by no means necessarily indicated compliance with Nazi ideology. See Ronald Headland, *Messages of Murder: A study of the Reports of the Einsatzgruppen of the Security Police and the Security Service, 1941-1943*. (London: Associated University Presses, 1992), 143.

<sup>39</sup> Quoted in Martin Dean, *Collaboration*, 67.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

concerns, such as anti-communism, careerism, personal greed, peer pressure, alcoholism and opportunism were more compelling motivations for joining the local police. Dean felt that “willing executioners” (as defined by Christopher Browning), was not an apt title for these men, because it did not do justice to the complex range in behavior patterns exhibited. As an approach to perpetrator motivation, Browning’s analysis of the “ordinary men” in German Reserve Police Battalion 101 is more persuasive, as he identifies various behaviors and motives within the whole group.<sup>42</sup> While some factors of Browning’s analysis such as Nazi indoctrination and being far from home did not play a role in auxiliary police participation, his final conclusion holds true: “Human responsibility is ultimately an individual matter.”<sup>43</sup>

To ensure allegiance to the Germans, members of auxiliary units were required to take the following oath: “As a member of the auxiliaries, I swear to be loyal, brave, and obedient and to conscientiously fulfill my duties, especially in the battle against genocidal Bolshevism [*volkermordender Bolschewismus*]. I am prepared to give my life for this oath, so help me God.”<sup>44</sup> Members received only very basic drill and weapons training, and amateurism and an overall lack of experience were qualities with which the Germans had to contend.<sup>45</sup> However, some *Schutzmannschaft* were seen as more competent than others; battalions from Lithuania and Ukraine were attached with German

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<sup>42</sup>Martin Dean, *Collaboration*, 76. Browning mentions ideology, indoctrination, the desire to follow orders, and conformity to help bridge the gap of understanding regarding why members of the Order Police took part in the executions. See Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992).

<sup>43</sup>Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men*, 188.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Edward B. Westerman, *Hitler’s Police*, 197.

<sup>45</sup> Ideological training was not introduced until autumn of 1942, by which time the majority of the mass liquidations had already occurred. Selected members of the local police (mainly the NCOs), were given the opportunity to attend 8-week long courses where such topics as “The common enemy of the European Peoples-The Jews” and “A people will be strong and happy once the Jew has been driven out” were discussed. See Martin Dean, *Collaboration*, 73.

police battalions when they entered Belorussia. Records from Gomel indicate that thirty Ukrainian *Schutzmannschaft* assisted the Germans in the city in the days following the invasion.<sup>46</sup>

Former security personnel, family members of people persecuted under the Soviet regime and, in some parts of Ukraine, prisoners of war, were typically volunteers of the police forces.<sup>47</sup> Oswald Rufeisen joined the local police in Mir, Belorussia in November 1941 and noted,

These policemen were not conscripts, they were all volunteers. They were aged between 25 and 35 years...Generally the local policemen were not held in great esteem by the local population...Some of them were inclined to alcoholism...There were about 25 local men in the police at this time and 12 Gendarmes to cover an area of some 20-25 villages. The Gendarmes relied on the local officers as they did not know the country or the language.<sup>48</sup>

The auxiliary units were organized in a manner similar to the German police structure in the east. They were formed into companies and battalions along with smaller detachments, and were placed under the jurisdiction of the German police personnel.<sup>49</sup> By the end of 1941, Daluge estimated that there were 31,652 auxiliaries in the *Reichkommissariat Ostland* and 14,452 in the *Reichkommissariat Ukraine*. As the killings and partisan action increased throughout 1942, the number grew to about 300,000 total auxiliaries.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Leonid Smilovitsky, "Ghettos in the Gomel Region, Belorussia: Commonalities and Unique Features 1941-42." (Presented at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Center for Advanced Studies Symposium on the Holocaust in the Soviet Union, November 2003),10.

<sup>47</sup> Yehoshua R Buchler, "Local Police", 82.

<sup>48</sup> Oswald Rufeisen was actually a Jewish Pole with an 'Aryan' appearance. After he came into possession of a set of documents giving him a German nationality, he was able to pass as a Polish Catholic policeman in the town of Mir. There, he used his close ties with his superiors to pass along information to the Jewish residents of the ghetto and helped organize an uprising. Eventually, his ploy was discovered and he was forced into hiding. He ended up taking refuge at a nunnery, and impressed by the sisters' religious conviction, converted to Catholicism. See Martin Dean, *Collaboration*, 65 and Nechama Tec, *In the Lion's Den: The Life of Oswald Rufeisen*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

<sup>49</sup> Edward B. Westerman, *Hitler's Police*, 196.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 290. In 1941 all local policemen were volunteers. By 1942, due to an increase in partisan activity, there were many cases of individuals more or less being required to work for the police. Hitler's War

### *Autumn 1941: Increased Killings*

Following the summertime invasion and occupation of the Soviet Union, German forces quickly began to realize the extent of the massive task facing them; they were now engaged in a two-front war and urgently needed to consider issues of supply and manpower. Megargee notes:

The military operations of August and September were significant for Soviet prisoners and civilians in at least two ways. First, by conquering vast new stretches of territory and capturing yet more prisoners, the *Wehrmacht* increased its own burden; there was now more land to secure and exploit, longer supply lines to protect, and more potential enemies to control. Second, the fact that the Red Army and the Soviet government did not collapse, contrary to the German's confident pronouncements before the campaign, meant that the occupiers were probably even harsher toward some of their charges than they might otherwise have been...ideology worked in evil harmony with the military's more pragmatic motivations to further radicalize occupation policies.<sup>51</sup>

This radicalization included a shift from killing specific individuals of Jewish origin to exterminating entire communities, including women and children. While there is no single piece of written evidence that this would be the new status quo, the shift was met with enthusiasm from all levels of the chain of command. The army justified its role with the idea that there was a strong connection between the Jews and increasing partisan activity. This included taking part in reprisal actions against Jews and also, in some cases, in setting up ghettos, such as in Minsk.<sup>52</sup> However, it was the *Einsatzgruppen*, combined

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Directive No.46 on August 18, 1942 approved expansion of indigenous forces expressly for assistance against partisan warfare. To increase the size of their forces, some local units resorted to threats or arrested individuals to make them join. With a greater number of individuals being deported to Germany to work, some men joined the police simply to be able to stay at home. It is important to distinguish between those who voluntarily joined in 1941, and those forced to join in 1942 following the major executions. Of those who joined in 1942, most of the 'conscripts' were between the ages of 17-21, as older men had previously been drafted into the Red Army. See Martin Dean, *Collaboration*, 66, 74.

<sup>51</sup> Geoffrey Megargee, *War*, 89. For specific studies of the *Einsatzgruppen*, see Ronald Headland, *Messages of murder : a study of the reports of the Einsatzgruppen of the Security Police and the Security Service, 1941-1943* and *The Einsatzgruppen Reports: Dispatches of the Nazi Death Squads' Campaign Against the Jews in Occupied Territories of the Soviet Union July 1941-January 1943* edited by Yitzhak Arad, Shmuel Krawkowski, Shmuel Spector.

<sup>52</sup> Geoffrey Megargee, *War*, 70.

with other German military and police units as well as local auxiliaries that worked to “systematically annihilate the Jews of the Soviet Union.”<sup>53</sup> This was due not only to the agreements made prior to Operation Barbarossa and the subsequent mandates over the summer of 1941, but also due to General Anton von Bechtolsheim, the *Wehrmacht* commander in Belorussia, who issued an order November 24, 1941 which stipulated that, “...the Jews must disappear from the countryside...The carrying out of major actions against the Jews is not the responsibility of units of the Division. They are to be carried out by the civil or police authorities.”<sup>54</sup>

While the initial duties of newly-formed auxiliary police units included such mundane tasks as guarding factories and warehouses, patrolling streets, registering victims of German violence, making arrests, and guarding the Jewish population in the ghettos and escorting them to execution sites, there were also cases where the police were the perpetrators of the violence.<sup>55</sup> In Minsk, according to eyewitnesses, the auxiliary police gunned down fleeing Jews and grabbed children by the legs, banging them against tombstones until they died.<sup>56</sup> One witness to the violence in Minsk noted that the police seemed merry while sitting on top of the execution pits with machine guns, and “behaved as if they were at a wedding party.”<sup>57</sup> There is further evidence that the Germans passed off ‘unsavory’ tasks, such as the shooting of children, to the auxiliaries, as in this instance documented by *SS-Obersturmführer* August Hafner:

...Then Blobel ordered me to have the children executed. I asked him, ‘By whom should the shooting be carried out?’ He answered, ‘By the *Waffen-SS*.’ I raised an objection and said, ‘They are all young men. How are we going to answer to them if we make them shoot small children?’...I suggested that the Ukrainian militia of the *Feldkommandant*

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<sup>53</sup> Geoffrey Megargee, *War*, 94.

<sup>54</sup> Quoted in Martin Dean, *Collaboration*, 59.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

should shoot the children. There were no objections from either side to this suggestion...<sup>58</sup>

Despite the fact that the Germans passed some tasks along to auxiliaries, they were the main perpetrators of the *aktion* against Jews. The following comes directly from an *Einsatzgruppen* report dated December 2, 1941:

The troops and the German Administration have been satisfied with the work output of the Jews, who are of course motivated by no emotion except fear. Immediately following the military operations, the Jewish population remained undisturbed at first. It was only weeks, in some cases months, later that systematic shooting of the Jews were carried out by units of the Order Police specially set up for this purpose. This *Aktion* moved in the main from east to west. It was carried out entirely in public, with the assistance of Ukrainian militia...altogether about 150,000 to 200,000 Jews may have been executed in the *Reichskommissariat*...the solution of the Jewish Question...has had the following consequences:...elimination of urgently needed craftsmen, who were in many cases indispensable for the requirements of the *Wehrmacht*...adverse effects on troops which in any case have indirect contact with the executions...brutalizing effects on the units (Order Police) which carry out the executions...<sup>59</sup>

The report makes clear the fact that the extermination of the Jews was a joint operation. *Einsatzgruppen*, *Ordnungspolizei*, *Wehrmacht* and auxiliaries worked side by side in the systematic annihilation of the Jews throughout the occupied territories of the Soviet Union. Former policeman Oswald Rufeisen noted that, "Belorussian policemen and German gendarmes used to come to a village or small town, collect all the Jewish inhabitants, and then murder them. Each killing operation resulted in ten to forty victims, depending on how many Jews resided in a specific place."<sup>60</sup>

From a German perspective, the men were simply carrying out orders.

*Unteroffizier* Peter Maignart, who had been an acrobat in the circus prior to the war, was the Commander of the 6<sup>th</sup> Section of the 1<sup>st</sup> Company of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 536<sup>th</sup> Regiment,

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<sup>58</sup> Quoted in Ernst Klee, *The Good Old Days*, 153.

<sup>59</sup> Wehrmacht Report on the Extermination of the Jews in the Ukraine, December 2, 1941. PS-3257. Yad Vashem Archives, Israel.

<sup>60</sup> Quoted in Edward B. Westerman, *Hitler's Police*, 198.

384<sup>th</sup> Division of the *Wehrmacht*. He related the following: “Our rifles were pointed at the back of the Jews’ heads. I had to shoot a young teenage girl, among others. In German she said to me: ‘How can you murder people?’ I answered: ‘Orders.’ Then I shot her. Altogether I shot twenty-five people that day, maybe more; I cannot say exactly how many. Others shot more.”<sup>61</sup>

Throughout the occupied territories, people were being shot in the manner described above. Russian war correspondent Vasily Grossman noted the similarity of the execution style, writing:

Executions were carried out in precisely the same manner in places that were separated by hundreds and sometimes even thousands of kilometers. Such complete uniformity attests to the fact that instructions were secretly worked out beforehand. The executioners followed these instructions. The shape and depth of the pits, the procedure for conveying people to the execution sites, the explanations that the Germans gave to the people taken to be executed—who were often unaware of their fate until the last minute—all of it was carried out in the same manner in thousands of cases.<sup>62</sup>

Perpetrators followed specific guidelines. German Captain Salog, a Police Regiment Commander, explained:

Preparations for shooting the Jewish population were...made ahead of time...they consisted of the following:

1. The concentration of the Jewish population
2. The designation of a Jewish quarter
3. The compilation of precise lists
4. The gathering together of the Jews from various population points
5. The selection of the site to do the shooting<sup>63</sup>

Another policeman added, “The convoy columns were set up like this: two gendarmes walked five to ten paces in front of the first row of the column of Jews, with

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<sup>61</sup> Quoted in Ilya Ehrenburg and Vasily Grossman, *The Complete Black Book of Russian Jewry*, trans. and ed. David Patterson. (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2002), 566.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, xxx.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 567.

thirty to thirty five policemen on the sides..”<sup>64</sup> The strict regulation of the system allowed a rapid pace for the shootings. Major Bernhard Bechler, member of the Board of the Union of German Officers, wrote in November 1941, “...Three days ago *Reichsführer SS* Himmler visited the *SS Führer* of a certain army group and happened to ask how many Jews were being shot each day as per his order. After hearing the number, Himmler shouted: “What swinish cowardice! Follow the example of your colleague in the Nord Army Group, where they are shooting five times as many as you are!”<sup>65</sup> After the initial massacre local police would search the surrounding areas for survivors. “The local police would then complete the unfinished work... [they] would diligently search for the Jews over a period of days or weeks and then murder them. They searched for the unfortunate hidden Jews in the houses, in the attics, ditches, the surrounding woods and other such places. Those who distinguished themselves in catching Jews, the Germans rewarded handsomely with gifts.”<sup>66</sup>

Yet how was such a ruthless plan carried out so quickly and effectively and without major opposition from the populace? Leonid Rein argues that the Holocaust in the East was on a much shorter timeline than in the West in part because much of the public held Jews to be an unworthy part of society in the East. The Germans could quickly remove the Jews from a society in which they stood as ‘second-class citizens’, and begin murdering them within days.<sup>67</sup> While there certainly existed a strong sense of

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<sup>64</sup> Ilya Ehrenburg, *The Complete*, 570.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 564. (in *Fries Deutschland*, No 23, 19 December 1943).

<sup>66</sup> Quoted in Martin Dean, *Collaboration*, 85.

<sup>67</sup> Leonid Rein, “Local Collaboration,” 388.

anti-Semitism in some quarters, the Germans found that they were unable to exploit it as much as they had hoped.<sup>68</sup>

An *Einsatzgruppen* report from October 15, 1941 states:

...it was obvious from the beginning that only the first days after the Occupation would offer the opportunity for carrying out pogroms...it was expected that the Jewish problem in *Ostland* could not be solved by pogroms alone. At the same time the Security Police had basic, general orders for cleansing operations aimed at a maximum elimination of the Jews. Large-scale executions were therefore carried out in the cities and the countryside...It must also be noted that in some places there has been considerable resistance by offices of the Civil Administration against large-scale executions. This [resistance] was confronted in every case by pointing out that it was matter of carrying out orders [involving] a basic principle.<sup>69</sup>

It is estimated that nearly eighty percent of Belorussia's one million Jews prior to the invasion perished in two great waves of killings in the autumn of 1941 and mid-1942.<sup>70</sup>

### ***A Case Study of Auxiliaries: The Holocaust in Gomel, Belarus***

Gomel *Oblast* (region) was formed in January 1938 in the Southwest region of Belorussia. By 1941, it comprised fifteen *rayony* (districts) with the city of Gomel as its capital. Gomel was not only a significant industrial city but a major transportation junction, connecting routes between large cities in Belorussia and Ukraine, and therefore of strategic interest to German forces. The latter did not arrive in Gomel until two months after the start of Operation Barbarossa on June 20, 1941.

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<sup>68</sup> In the inter-war period, Belorussia was divided between Poland and the Soviet Union. In the Polish portion, Woodrow Wilson's *Fourteen Points* (guaranteeing rights to ethnic minorities), encouraged Poland to grant autonomy to the Jewish communities. However, violence throughout Poland towards Jews increased during this period; a series of pogroms started in 1919 and continued throughout the 1930s. In eastern Belorussia, official Soviet policies condemned anti-Semitism yet it was still rampant, in part due to urbanization and new economic policies. In frustration at new Soviet policies, many Belorussians blamed the traditional scapegoats: Jews. These Belorussians associated Jews with the Revolution, collectivization and being Party 'organs,' and maintained an antagonistic attitude towards them for this reason. Anti-Semitism was already an established 'fixture' throughout Russian history; complex inter-ethnic relations were thus commonplace throughout what would come to be the occupied territories of the Soviet Union. See Leonid Rein, "Local Collaboration," and Leonid Smilovitsky, "Ghettos," 386.

<sup>69</sup> Extracts from a Report by Einsatzgruppe A in the Baltic Countries, 1941. L-180. Yad Vashem Archives, Israel.

<sup>70</sup> Leonid Rein, "Local Collaboration," 387.

Of the five different administrative structures in Nazi-occupied Belorussia, the two main divisions were a civil (*Reichskommissariat Ostland*) and military (Rear Army Group Center) administration.<sup>71</sup> It is important to note how the Germans divided the Gomel *oblast*: part was subordinate to Rear Army Group Center and thus under military jurisdiction (including the actual city of Gomel), while the second half was annexed to *Reichskommissariat Ukraine* and was under the jurisdiction of the *Zhitomer* general district.<sup>72</sup> In November 1941, the first large-scale shootings of Jews occurred in Gomel.<sup>73</sup> Letters from Belorussian children throughout Gomel Oblast to Vasily Grossman (for his *Black Book*), explained what had happened in their towns:

The Germans herded all the Jews into one place and made them work for the Germans. Then the Germans came and started to drive out the Jews. One German went up to a shoemaker and the shoemaker hit him in the head with a hammer, and the German fell down. They shot the shoemaker. The rest of the Jews were all loaded into trucks and taken away to be killed. Along the way one woman jumped out of the truck and escaped. They took the Jews to the hospital and killed them there. -V. Vorobeva, 4<sup>th</sup> grade

The monsters tortured the Jews and beat them with whips. When they were taking them away to be shot, one Jewish woman threw her baby from the truck. People wanted to get the baby, but the German's wouldn't let them; they took the baby to the pit and killed it. But the mother escaped into the woods. She stayed in the woods until nighttime. Then she came to look for her baby and the Germans shot her. -Lyuba Maiorova, 3<sup>rd</sup> grade<sup>74</sup>

In 1939, the *oblast* had 67,578 Jews, amounting to some 7.5% of the overall population.<sup>75</sup> However, an influx of refugees from German-occupied Poland brought the number of Jews in the city of Gomel to 44,000 by the summer of 1941. Due to the location of the *oblast* in the far southwestern corner of Belorussia, the Germans did not

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<sup>71</sup> Leonid Rein, "Local Collaboration," 400.

<sup>72</sup> Leonid Smilovitsky, "Ghettos". See also, D. Romanovsky, "How Many Jews Perished in the Industrial Districts of Eastern Byelorussia at the Beginning of the German Occupation (July-December 1941)?" and Marat Botvinnik, *Pamyatniki Genotsida Evreev Belarusi* [The Monuments in Memory of the Genocide of Jews in Belarus].

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>74</sup> Ilya Ehrenburg, *The Complete*, 573.

<sup>75</sup> Martin Dean, *Collaboration*, 170.

reach the city of Gomel until August 19, 1941. This two-month gap between the initial invasion and the actual occupation was fortunate for some residents; nearly forty major businesses were evacuated from the city, and 80,000 people (including 40,000 Jews) managed to escape.<sup>76</sup> Even so, data indicates that 32,633 Jews were killed in Gomel *oblast* from 1941-43, of some one hundred thousand total people who were exterminated in the prisons, four ghettos and five POW camps by the time the Red Army reoccupied the city on November 26, 1943.<sup>77</sup>

Vasily Grossman's first assignment as a war correspondent was to report from Gomel. On August 5, 1941, prior to the arrival of the German troops on August 19, he wrote:

"Gomel! What sadness there is in this quiet green town...Children are playing in the piles of sand brought here to extinguish incendiary bombs...the Germans are less than fifty kilometers away...Bombing of Gomel. A cow, howling bombs, fire, women...the strong smell of perfume-from a pharmacy...blocked out the stench of the burning, just for a moment. The picture of burning Gomel in the eyes of a wounded cow..."<sup>78</sup>

Grossman's poetic words were quickly blighted by the reality of the German occupation. After the German invasion of the city, some 4000 remaining Jews quickly were registered and forced to wear strips of yellow cloth on their arms; the authorities strictly forbade any interaction with non-Jews. Such sudden and drastic measures brought forth chaos, as the archives from Gomel *oblast*:

The Germans invaded the city of Gomel, Belorussia, on 19 August 1941...Those who lived in Gomel loved their city...The German-Fascist invaders, with their [*murderous*] souls, had a hatred of certain men, and a "theory" started in the crazy book in Germany by the tyrant Hitler...The vile, heinous people persecuted their targets, annihilating and destroying the property of the Soviet State...the Soviet citizen will always remember the time under the Fascist yoke...Hitlerites destroyed the city; 5000 homes were

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<sup>76</sup> Leonid Smilovitsky, "Ghettos," 1.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 9, 18. The data is still incomplete, as of yet. Additionally, records from the Extraordinary State Commission indicate that 16, 745 citizens from Gomel *oblast* were taken to Germany for forced labor.

<sup>78</sup> Vasily Grossman, *A Writer at War: Vasily Grossman with the Red Army, 1941-1945*, trans. and ed. Antony Beevor and Luba Vinogradova (New York: Pantheon Books, 2005), 9.

thought to be destroyed, but the number was closer to 3800 homes. They erased the face of the land for 20 km around the once-beautiful city. Destroying all of the buildings, they have burnt everything up to the outskirts of the settlement “Monasteryk” where the executioners organized a Jewish “Ghetto.”<sup>79</sup>

The narrative from the archives continues, expanding on the development of the ghettos:

During the first period...the Hitlerites started the universal destruction of all the Jews, because the Fascist murderers had the theory that they were a “defective” people. The number one proclamation was by the German Commandant of the city, Shveck, who proclaimed that all Jews would wear humiliating yellow strips on their arms... [*No matter their nationality*]. Then, under the threat of death, the Jews were forbidden to appear in the city [*outside of the ghetto*]. As another measure, the Fascists organized in a different area four Jewish ‘Ghettos’ where they put more than 4000 citizens of Jewish nationality, including elders, women and children.<sup>80</sup>

By October of 1941, the Germans established twenty ghettos throughout the *oblast*, housing some 21,000 Jews. Four ghettos were established in the city of Gomel alone; 800 Jews were forced into the Monasteryk ghetto, 500 into the Novo-Lyubenskaya Street ghetto, and the remaining 2,700 Jews were divided between the ghettos on Bykhovskaya Street and Novo-Belitsa Street.<sup>81</sup> Local police vigilantly guarded the ghettos and contact with the Jewish residents was strictly forbidden. Ghettos in Gomel were significantly different from other ghettos in Belorussia, as Leonid Smilovitsky notes: rather than areas in which to hold the Jews indefinitely, ghettos in Gomel served as a means to segregate the Jews for swift extermination. Indeed, the German authorities first implemented the program of general annihilation of the Jews of Eastern Belorussia in Gomel *oblast*, and for this reason Smilovitsky categorizes them as concentration camps instead of ghettos. Without a clear economic value to the Germans, the ghettos of

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<sup>79</sup>Gomel MMS. RG 53.005M Reel #2, Fond 1345, Opis 1, Folder 9. USHMM.

<sup>80</sup> Gomel MMS. RG 53.005M Reel #1 Fond 1820 Opis 1 Folder 3. USHMM.

<sup>81</sup> Leonid Smilovitsky, “Ghettos,” 4.

the city of Gomel lasted less than three months.<sup>82</sup> Conditions were horrible: “In the ‘Ghetto’ the Soviet citizens were placed under horrible conditions: [overcrowding of people]...and lack of sufficient food... and the prisoners were placed under the threat of execution ...So lived the Jews of the ‘Ghetto’.”<sup>83</sup> A witness testified that, “Whole groups of arrested people would perish due to famine.”<sup>84</sup> Jews in the ghetto were constantly robbed by the German and Belorussian police: “The Jews, in the prison of the ghetto, were guarded by German and Russian policemen. Numerous German soldiers...arranged ‘excursions in the ghetto’ for the robbery of unfortunate people. Simultaneously, the Germans and policemen made a ‘pogrom’ throughout the old Jewish city quarter; all of their property was exposed to plunder.”<sup>85</sup>

Conditions were nearly as bad in the prisons throughout the *oblast*; thousands of ‘peaceful citizens’ (*mirny grajdany*) were arrested by the Germans on the pretense of suspicious activity and interrogated there. The GFP (German secret field police) operated its own prison, while the SD maintained a camp for suspicious persons on Sovietskaya Street. The same street also housed four buildings comprising Gomel’s main prison and a prisoner of war camp located in a former cavalry barracks.<sup>86</sup> Torture and executions by firing squads were everyday occurrences, and rations consisted of not much more than 200 grams of bread per day. Former prisoner Nicolai Artemevich Barukov testified about the “brutal animalistic beatings the fascist bastards” imposed on Soviet citizens in the torture chambers. “At the interrogations, there were strong beatings...daily,

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<sup>82</sup> Leonid Smilovitsky, “Ghettos,” 5.

<sup>83</sup> Gomel MMS. RG 53.005M Reel #2, Fond 1345, Opis 1, Folder 9. USHMM.

<sup>84</sup> Gomel MMS. RG 53.005M Reel #1, Fond 1820, Opis 1, Folder 3 USHMM.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Leonid Smilovitsky, “Ghettos,” 10.

heartbreaking cries reached me from these rooms,” he recounted.<sup>87</sup> A convicted collaborator, Semenov (referred to in the testimony as “the accomplice of Fascist atrocities and Soviet traitor of the native land”), confirmed that, “The basis for the measure of punishment applied by the GFP...was execution.”<sup>88</sup> He testified that the guards at the prisons and work camps were in fact Russian police.<sup>89</sup> This statement corroborates additional evidence regarding the police structure in Gomel *oblast*.

**Number of Jews who died in Ghettos on the Gomel  
Region Territory, 1941-1942.**

Populated Areas	Jews in 1939	Establishment of Ghetto	Liquidation of Ghetto	Total number who Died	Sources
Buda-Koshelevo	496	October 25, 1941	December 27, 1941	485	Gomel Oblast GA (government archives), f.1345, op. 1, d. 7, l. 8; GARF, f.7021, op. 85, d. 35, l.8-11.
Gomel, 4 ghettos on Byhovskaya, Monastyrek, Novo-Lyubenskaya, Novo-Belitsa streets	40.880	Beginning of October 1941	Beginning of November 1941	4000	NARB, f. 861, op. 1, d. 6, l.4; Gomel Oblast GA. f.1345, op. 1, d.9, l. 4, 181-203, 226; d. 12, l.34; GARF, f. 7021, op. 85, d.413, l.15; d. 415, l. 40
Gorodets Village of Rogachev district	?	September 1941	October 1941	?	Gomel Oblast GA, f.1345, op.1, d. 15, l. 55
Dobrush, 3 kilometers from town	441	September 1941	October 1941	103	GARF, f. 7021, op. 85, d.38, l. 1 10, 22

*In total, there were 20 ghettos in Gomel oblast for 21, 828 Jews.*<sup>90</sup>

***Police Organization in Gomel***

From August-September 1941, a number of different police units became active in the Gomel region, including the Gestapo (*Geheime Staatspolizei*, or secret state police), SD (*Sicherheitsdienst*, or security service), local civilian police (*Ortskommandantur*),

<sup>87</sup> Gomel MMS. RG 53.005M Reel #1 Fond 1820 Opis 1, Folder 3. USHMM.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Gomel MMS. RG 53.005M Reel #1 Fond 1820 Opis 1, Folder 3. USHMM.

<sup>90</sup> Leonid Smilovitsky, “Ghettos,” 20.

Field Gendarmerie, secret field police (*Geheime Feldpolizei*, or GFP), *Schutzpolizei* (protective police) and *Wachpolizei* (sentry police).<sup>91</sup> The postwar Extraordinary State Commission in Gomel revealed further information about the police structure in Gomel. Captain Greeshan, a member of the police from May 5, 1942 to September 24, 1943 testified at the trial that no fewer than eleven types of police operated in the city of Gomel, and detailed the activities of each.<sup>92</sup> The GFP, Greeshan recounted, started in Gomel in August 1941 under a German officer by the name of Arthur Karlovich.<sup>93</sup> It quickly adopted execution as its primary punishment, and its personnel carried out their first executions in the courtyard of its headquarters before relocating to more remote locations. Greeshan notes that the SD, under a German officer named Krause, worked hand-in-hand with local police and were “mainly occupied with repressing the Jews of Gomel *oblast*. All of the Jewish population of Gomel was arrested with the help of the Russian police. Then, the SD took away the Jews... The direct assistants of the SD were the Russian police.”<sup>94</sup>

“Russian police” (*ruskaya politzi*) refers in this case to the Gomel City Police as constituted on August 26, 1941, a mere eight days after the Germans occupied the city. The chief was a former Red Army colonel named Kardakov, who oversaw four main divisions: the criminal, political and police departments as well as the reserve division, with Belorussian chiefs in charge of each. The entire organization fell under the control of Gupker, a German lieutenant. The city of Gomel itself was divided into five districts

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<sup>91</sup> Leonid Smilovitsky, “Ghettos,” 19.

<sup>92</sup> Gomel MMS. RG 53.005M Reel #2, Fond 1345, Opis 1, Folder 9. USHMM. The eleven types of police in Gomel were as follows: GFP (*Geheime* Field Police), SD, an attached “other group” of the SD (*Sleddstvennaya Groupa*), GM (Gomel City Police-German), *Schutzpolizei*, Field Gendarmes, Gomel *Oblast* Police (‘Russian’ police), Gomel City Police (Local-the ‘Russian’ police), Administrative Police, German War Command Unit and Regional Prison Guards (Russian).

<sup>93</sup> Leonid Smilovitsky, “Ghettos,” 10.

<sup>94</sup> Gomel MMS. RG 53.005M Reel #2, Fond 1345, Opis 1, Folder 9.USHMM.

with thirty to forty police assigned to each, and the four divisions operated across them all. Their various functions included drawing up lists of “suspicious people,” investigating criminal offenses, enforcing nightly blackouts, working against moonshiners, and dispatching laborers to Germany to work in the economy. Additionally, according to Greeshan, “At the time of mass arrests in the fall of 1941, the division helped arrest people and then guarded the lager where those arrested were taken. All those who collaborated received a reward from the chief of police[.]”<sup>95</sup>

As a local policeman himself, Greeshan was intimately familiar with the structure of the local police, but possessed less of an understanding of the specifically German organizations. He noted that the German Field Gendarmes mainly enforced the blackout at night and patrolled the streets, while the *Schutzpolizei* served as local guards, and that the regional prison guards were German. In his testimony before the Extraordinary State Commission is an indictment of twenty-two fellow collaborators who participated actively in repression of the Jews and other activities during the occupation:

Ivan Ivanovich Sherakov, worked with the police as a city block [division] supervisor. He actively participated during the period of massive repression of the Jews. He also stole confiscated belongings from the Jews. He lived on Tolstova street at house number 13...his apartment was often visited by German officers and the translator by the name of ‘Green’ along with the Gendarmes. The chief of the GFP, Arthur Karlovich, organized drunken parties there often. Sherakov was also active in the violent deportation of young people to Germany, but he tried to seem like he was more important than he actually was. Description: 45-46 years old, brunette, round face, straight nose and of medium height.<sup>96</sup>

On the basis of his and other testimony, the Extraordinary State Commission in Gomel concluded that the “German fascist” safety police, or SD, was the most powerful of the police organizations, with local subordinates under their direct management, the

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<sup>95</sup>Gomel MMS. RG 53.005M Reel #2, Fond 1345, Opis 1, Folder 9.USHMM.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid. All of the twenty-two collaborators mentioned by Greeshan were wanted for active participation against the Jews, as well as for arresting Jews and guarding the ghetto.

so-called 'Russian SD,' or city civil police. The local SD had "over forty Hitlerite bandits" in management positions and "sowed death and destruction" everywhere; with help from the local police, the Commission estimated that they murdered 10-12,000 Soviet citizens in the city during the occupation.<sup>97</sup>

But the real focus of efforts was directed against the Jews of Gomel. From August through December 1941, the Germans systematically exterminated that population. Immediately after entering the town on August 19, 1941, they killed ten Jews under the pretext that they had participated in sabotage, boding far more killings to come. Smilovitsky notes that regularly on the seventh and twenty-second of each month, Jews were murdered in the woods by the village of Davidovka by the *Einsatzgruppen* in addition to the GFP, German Order Police, Field Gendarmerie and all local police commands.<sup>98</sup> While some additional number died in the prison or labor camps throughout the city, the majority were executed in the prison yard or, later, in the Leshchinets forest, by the machine and tractor repair shop near Davidovka.<sup>99</sup>

The liquidation of the Monastyrsk ghetto was easily the largest execution in Gomel. In early November 1941, a notice appeared in the ghetto forbidding occupants to leave their residence before 9am the next day. By 6am on November 3, the policemen of the third police district in Gomel encircled the ghetto and began evicting the Jews by force. The residents were forbidden from removing any personal belongings, and Smilovitsky notes that "Several members of the eviction party put a bucket on the head of an old man and made him dance while they pounded on the bucket with sticks and

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<sup>97</sup> Gomel MMS. RG 53.005M Reel #1 Fond 1820 Opis 1 Folder 3. USHMM. Of these, 4000 were Jewish (these numbers are for the city alone, not the entire *oblast*).

<sup>98</sup> Leonid Smilovitsky, "Ghettos," 6.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

laughed. Two mentally retarded youths were shot on the spot[.]”<sup>100</sup> By 10am all had been formed into a loose column and forced to an anti-tank ditch in the field near the repair shop. Smilovitsky recounted that “the Jews were forced to lie down in the ditch and were shot with sub-machine guns. Many of them were buried alive. Eyewitnesses recounted that ‘the earth was breathing and steaming.’”<sup>101</sup> Witnesses from Gomel recalled after the war that, “defenseless women, elders and children were shot by the bastards...with that, in the city of Gomel, 4000 Soviet citizens of the Jewish nationality perished.”<sup>102</sup>

According to partial data, as many as twenty-five hundred people were executed near the repair shop alone on November 3-4, 1941.<sup>103</sup>

Other locations were used for executions as well. According to the Commission, the authorities annihilated entire columns of 300 or more at once along the Gomel highway, in the field by the tractor factory and in the Leshinets forest near the town of Davidovka: "During the time of massive executions of Soviet citizens, there were traitors who shot their own countrymen. The ‘Hitlerite terrorists’ used between two and six automatic weapons [machine guns] to execute people two to five times per month. In the forest near Davidovka alone, the Fascists murdered more than one thousand Soviet citizens alone.”<sup>104</sup>

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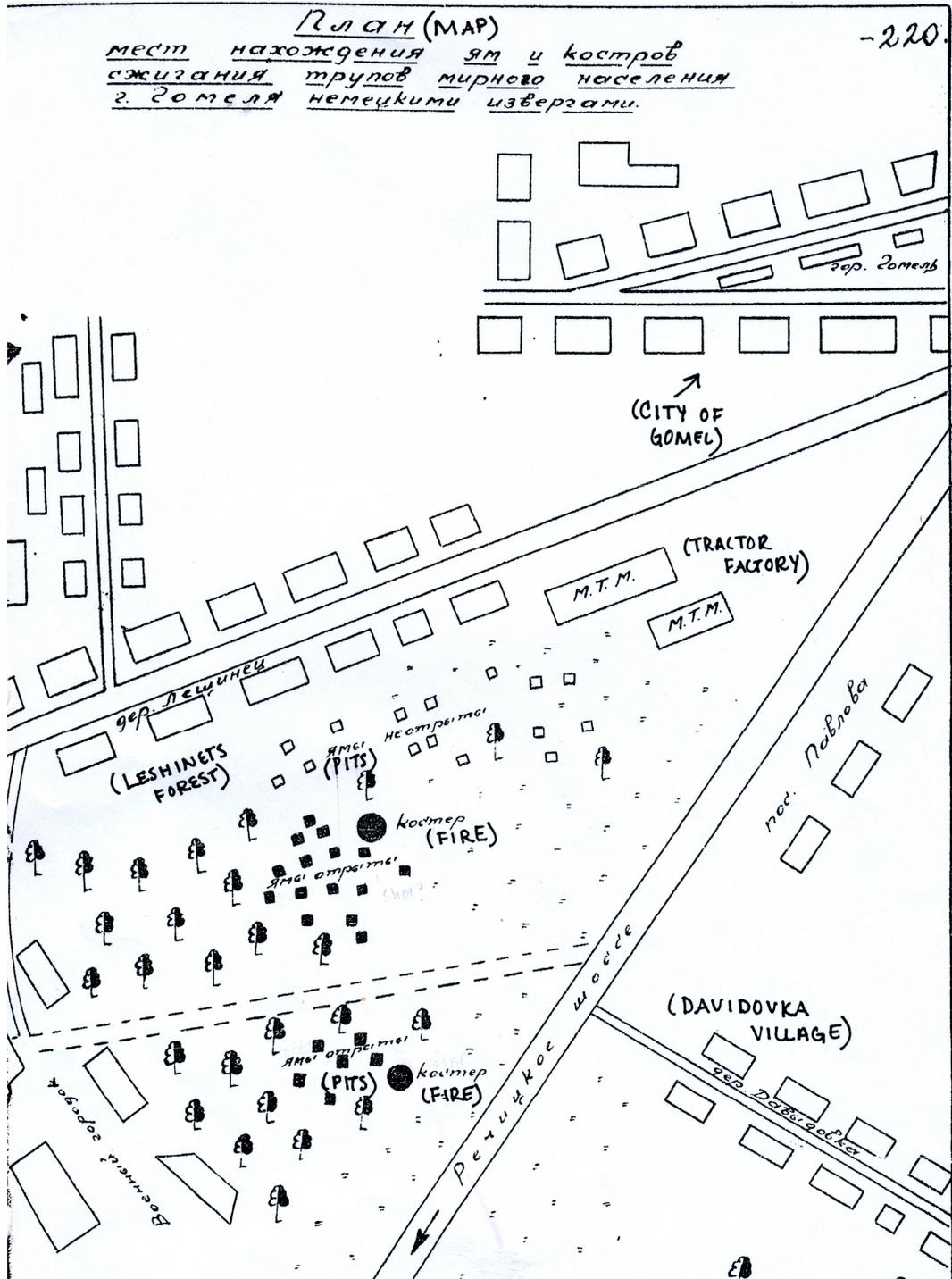
<sup>100</sup> Leonid Smilovitsky, “Ghettos,” 7

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 8. The statement, “The earth was breathing and steaming,” from eyewitnesses corresponds to Fr. Patrick Debois’s research. He found many Ukrainian witnesses who recounted that the “dirt moved for three days” due to the excessive number of people who were only wounded when they were shot, and thus, were buried alive. See Patrick Debois. *The Holocaust by Bullets*, 65.

<sup>102</sup> Gomel MMS. RG 53.005M Reel #1 Fond 1820 Opus 1 Folder 3.USHMM.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid. Paul Blobel’s *Sonderkommando-1005* exhumed the corpses in Gomel from 1942-1943 with the help of POWs and local inhabitants, and burned the remains in piles. Following this, tractors plowed the ground, and it was sown with grass seed.

<sup>104</sup> Gomel MMS. RG 53.005M Reel #1 Fond 1345 Opus 2 Folder 7. USHMM.



Map of where the shootings occurred in Gomel, Belorussia. Squares indicate mass graves and circles denote the massive fires used to burn the bodies under Operation 1005.<sup>105</sup>

<sup>105</sup> Gomel MMS. RG 53.005M Reel #2 Fond 1345, Opis 1 Folder 9. USHMM.

In addition to local collaborators who participated actively in the atrocities, Smilovitsky notes the frequency with which the locals handed over Jews, including those who were also escaped prisoners-of-war from the Red Army. The Germans had discovered Jews among the POWs in camp near Gomel in the winter of 1942. Local policemen stripped these men in the severe cold and poured water directly on them until they froze to death.<sup>106</sup>

On November 26, 1943, the Red Army drove the Germans from Gomel during the great Soviet offensives of that season. During the two years of occupation, the population had decreased drastically, from 145,217 in 1941 to 47,163 in May 1944, a mere 32.5 percent of the pre-war level.<sup>107</sup> In total, six mass graves were scattered around the city, and eyewitnesses soon put forth accounts of the atrocities to the Extraordinary State Commission.<sup>108</sup> Memorialization of the atrocities were not permitted until nearly twenty years after the fact; in 1959 a monument was erected in Pokolyubichy to commemorate the execution of eleven Jews on November 6, 1941 by Germans and members of the local police. Later, in 1973, the community erected an obelisk commemorating the liquidation of the Monasteryek ghetto and another in 1991 along the Chernigov highway.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Leonid Smilovitsky, "Ghettos," 3.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 9. Smilovitsky does not indicate when in 1941 the data was compiled; people who evacuated prior to the invasion should be taken into account. (From the State Archives of Social Unions of Gomel).

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 9. The Commission found the following German officers guilty of key roles in the atrocities: Lieutenant-General Arthur Kulmer, commander of the German 296<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division; Lieutenant-General Eberhard von Kurovsky, commander of the 110<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division; Major-General Gunter Klamt, commander of the 6<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the 260<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division; Lieutenant-Colonel Max Hildesheim, commander of the 255<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the 110<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division; Captain Muller, chief of the GM, and his deputy Otto Harma, and a GM investigator, Captain Dreis.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 10.

### *Inconsistencies in the Historiography*

With evidence such as the records of Gomel from the Extraordinary State Commission, it is initially puzzling to consider why local police collaboration in the Holocaust was so little understood for the first sixty years of the postwar era. Moreover, only in the past two decades has the experience of Soviet Jews begun to factor more prominently into the historiography of the Holocaust, despite the facts that the memorial organization Yad Vashem, based on Raul Hilberg's research, has estimated that approximately two million of the Holocaust's five-to-six million victims were killed within the 1941 borders of the Soviet Union.<sup>110</sup>

The reasons for this discrepancy are complex. Holocaust scholar Wendy Lower identified four major contributions to the slow development of research on the Holocaust in the Soviet Union: an initial primary concern with German 'causation' and records; the 'Auschwitz syndrome,' or a focus on the mass killing centers; linguistic difficulties of the area (a mix of German, Russian, Ukrainian, Polish, Yiddish and Hebrew documents); and finally, the fact that the regional archives of the Soviet Union were not open to scholars until 1991.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> One in four Jews who perished during the Holocaust died in the Soviet Union. Despite this fact, Raul Hilberg's *Destruction of the European Jews* devotes only 70 of 700 pages to the events in the USSR, while Nora Levin's *The Holocaust* devotes only 80 of 700 (including events in Poland). Lucy Dawidowicz's *The War against the Jews* does not even have a chapter regarding the events in the USSR. See Zvi Gitelman, ed. *Bitter Legacy: Confronting the Holocaust in the USSR*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 230. More recent publications have devoted more attention to this area of study; Yitzhak Arad's 2009 publication, *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union*, is devoted entirely to the subject, and also of importance are Ray Brandon and Wendy Lower's *The Shoah in Ukraine: History, Testimony, Memorialization*; Fr. Patrick Debois' *The Holocaust by Bullets*; Geoffrey Megargee's *War of Annihilation: Combat and Genocide on the Eastern Front, 1941*; Martin Dean's *Collaboration in the Holocaust: Crimes of the Local Police in Belorussia and the Ukraine, 1941-1944* and Lucjan Dobroszycki and Jeffrey S. Gurock's, *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union: studies and sources on the destruction of the Jews in the Nazi-occupied territories of the USSR, 1941-1945*.

<sup>111</sup> Ray Brandon and Wendy Lower, eds., *The Shoah in Ukraine: History, Testimony, Memorialization*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 6.

Additionally, Soviet reluctance in the first postwar years to acknowledge publicly the extent of local collaboration, as well as the sensitivity such issues aroused in former Soviet satellite countries, also partially explains the lack of historical attention paid to the subject.<sup>112</sup> Zvi Gittleman writes that:

The Holocaust has not been fully and honestly confronted in many parts of the former Soviet Union because it raises painful unresolved issues...among the highly sensitive and potentially explosive issues emanating from the Holocaust is the collaboration of local peoples with the Nazis in the murder of their Jewish neighbors...those nations have not fully acknowledged the role of some...in the systemic mass murders that constituted the Holocaust.<sup>113</sup>

In contrast to the mechanized killing centers concentrated at points across central Europe at the end of the war, the occupied regions of the Soviet Union were instead strewn with mass graves, the product of a less centralized but no less systematic killing process. “Where we come from the Nazis machine-gun the Jews but in the West they kill them in camps,” reported one Red Army nurse.<sup>114</sup> Red Army soldiers reclaiming Soviet lands found towns entirely devoid of Jews. But unlike what they encountered in Poland, there were no gas chambers, no cremation ovens and very few bodies to photograph. German authorities had worked to destroy evidence of their crimes in the hastily

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<sup>112</sup> Following the end of the war, Stalin enacted an unofficial “Do Not Divide the Dead” policy to maintain the image of a ‘united Soviet people’ who were essentially peaceful and had fought valiantly against the fascist invader. All publications on the unique tragedy of the Jewish people were prohibited by 1947 and the suffering of the Soviet people as a whole became the focus. In 1948, “*Zhdanovschina*”, or the emergence of anti-Jewish sentiments, swept the upper echelons of Moscow, and the extermination of Soviet Jews was seen merely as part of the twenty million overall deaths of Soviet citizens in the occupied territories. The term ‘genocide’ would not be used for the first fifteen years following the end of World War II. See Martin Dean, *Collaboration*, xii and Arno Lustiger, *Stalin and the Jews: The Tragedy of the Soviet Jews and the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee*. (New York: Enigma Books, 2003), 106.

<sup>113</sup> Quoted in Zi Gitelman, *Bitter Legacy*, vii. Only recently has the Holocaust been publicly acknowledged in many former Soviet satellite states; for example, in 2002, Latvian President Vaira Vike-Freiberga had to intervene directly to ensure that the inscription on a monument to 25,000 Jews killed in the Rumbula Forest near Riga included mention of Latvian collaborators as well as Nazis among the perpetrators. For many, nationalistic sentiments after years of Soviet rule have diminished the suffering of the Jews, and confronting local history, especially in regards to collaboration, has been painful since the collapse of communism. See Ruth Ellen Gruber, “In Eastern Europe, Advances Toward Accountability but More to Do.” 28 October 2009. <http://jta.org/news/article/2009/10/28/1008795/eastern-europes-reckoning-with-wartime-past-varies-widely> (accessed December 5, 2009).

<sup>114</sup> Quoted in Patrick Debois, *The Holocaust*, xv.

constructed *Operation 1005*, digging up as many graves as possible and then burning the bodies.<sup>115</sup> Later, the Stalinist regime discouraged Jewish survivors from memorializing their experiences, emphasizing instead that all crimes were German-Fascist atrocities against the citizens of the Soviet Union.<sup>116</sup>

Consequently, the Holocaust in the Soviet Union slipped gradually into historical oblivion, while images of Auschwitz took center stage in the public memory of Hitler's "Final Solution." William Korey noted that, "the Soviets [attempted] to obliterate the Holocaust in the memories of the Jews as well as the non-Jews...Expunging the Holocaust from the record of the past was hardly a simple matter, but unless it were done the profound anguish of the memory was certain to stir a throbbing national consciousness. Martyrdom, after all, is a powerful stimulus to a group's sense of its own identity."<sup>117</sup>

Studies of post-war Jewish literature in comparison to Belorussian or Ukrainian memoirs underline the result of selective memory in regards to the Holocaust; whereas the common Jewish memoir details local collaboration, a Belorussian or Ukrainian memory tends to avoid the issue of the Jewish experience, focusing instead on the

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<sup>115</sup> High-ranking SS member Paul Blobel, former *Sonderkommando 4a* Commander of the *Einsatzgruppen C* was placed in charge of *Operation 1005* and tasked with hiding all evidence of German atrocities committed on Soviet soil. Mass graves throughout the occupied areas were dug up and bodies burned on massive pyres. The results of the operation were sent to Berlin in the form of a meteorological code: the number of clouds indicated the number of graves found, while amount of rain designated the number of bodies that had been burned. However, because of the extent of the graves, not all of them could be exhumed. *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>116</sup> Throughout the years of the war, minimal articles were printed in regards to atrocities committed against Jews. The Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee printed some articles (such as those by Vasily Grossman), but Stalin and the rest of Moscow remained silent, convinced that singling the Jews out was detrimental to the united front of the 'Great Russian nation' during the 'Great Patriotic War.' Even the Extraordinary State Commission, established in 1942 to investigate and prosecute Nazis and their collaborators, was dissolved by the end of 1945. The number of Jews murdered by the Nazi's was called a 'military and state secret.' See Arno Lustiger, *Stalin*, 106 and Shimon Redlich, *War, Holocaust and Stalinism: A Documented History of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee in the USSR*. (Australia: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1995.)

<sup>117</sup> Quoted in Zvi Gitelman, *Bitter Legacy*, 18.

national suffering incurred under both the Soviets and Germans.<sup>118</sup> Similarly, the Soviets attempted to create the same sense of combined suffering through excluding the unique plight of Jews in the public narrative. Despite the occasional article in the Soviet news outlets during the war detailing specific atrocities against Jews, publications on the subject were not officially banned until after the war, during the wave of anti-Semitism that swept the Soviet Union.<sup>119</sup>

Even the documents of the “Soviet Extraordinary State Commission to Examine and Investigate German-Fascists Crimes Committed by the Invaders and their Accomplices on Soviet Territory” are politically selective.<sup>120</sup> The committee that gathered thousands of pages of testimonies and reports was specifically “instructed to avoid stating that the victims of the massacres had been Jews” (by Stalin), and “to suppress the extent of Ukrainian collaboration with the Germans and particularly with the SS in the mass shootings of Jews.”<sup>121</sup> Combined altogether, these reasons have made Auschwitz and other concentration camps the dominant symbols of the Holocaust in modern literature.

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<sup>118</sup> Vladimir Melamed, “Organized and Unsolicited Collaboration in the Holocaust: The Multifaceted Ukrainian Context.” *East European Jewish Affairs* 37 (August 2007):218.

<sup>119</sup> For an excellent comprehensive study of reports in the Soviet media of German atrocities against Jews during the war, see Karel C. Berkhoff, “Total Annihilation of the Jewish Population: The Holocaust in the Soviet Media, 1941-45.” *Kritika*, 10 (Winter 2009): 61-105. The issue of anti-Semitism in the post-war Soviet Union is a complicated topic; see Shimon Redlich, *Propaganda and Nationalism in Wartime Russia: The Jewish Antifascist Committee in the USSR, 1941-1948*; Yehoshua A. Gilboa, *The Black Years of Soviet Jewry, 1939-1953* and Benjamin Pinkus, *The Jews of the Soviet Union: The History of a National Minority*.

<sup>120</sup> This by no means detracts from their relevancy; they comprise the only documents on the trials in the post-war period in the USSR and are extremely valuable to researchers. However, the Katyn incident in 1940 (when Soviets murdered thousands of Polish POWs and later attempted to cover it up by blaming the Germans for the atrocities), has caused some historians to question the legitimacy of the Commission. For an excellent study of the Commission, especially in regards to its treatment of the Holocaust, see Kiril Feferman, “Soviet investigation of Nazi crimes in the USSR: documenting the Holocaust.” *Journal of Genocidal Research*, 5 (December 2003): 587-602.

<sup>121</sup> Quoted in Zvi Gitelman, *Bitter Legacy*, 21. The documents reveal that certain subcommittees adhered to this more so than others; the records from Gomel *oblast* are quite explicit regarding the treatment of the Jews and make no attempt to cover the specific persecution of the “citizens of Jewish nationality.” See Gomel MMS, RG53.005M, Reel #1, Fond 1345, Opis 2 Folder 7, USHMM.

This emphasis on concentration camps has, as the historiography shows, detracted from an equal focus on the Jews of Poland and the Soviet Union, and the Roma people as well. Yale historian Timothy Snyder argues that the symbolism of Auschwitz has overshadowed Operation Reinhardt in occupied Poland and the death pits in the occupied Soviet Union, which he claims were operationally more important in the implementation of the Holocaust elsewhere.<sup>122</sup> The principal reason that Auschwitz became such a powerful symbol was the presence of survivors able to tell their astounding stories and memorialize their experiences. Elsewhere, especially in Germany, pictures and testimonies from Allied soldiers and military correspondents allowed stories of the Nazi's infamous death camps to spread around the world. Photographs of emaciated prisoners and tales of the horrific crimes were likewise abundant as evidence in high-profile war crimes trials after the war. On the Eastern Front, with the dissolution of the Extraordinary State Commission in 1945, the Holocaust and the roles of local collaborators began to slip beyond the realms of public consciousness, despite the fact that it had been extensively documented.

***Vasily Grossman: The First Documentation of Collaboration in the Soviet Union***

Vasily Grossman was among the first authors to document the role of local police forces in the massacres of Jews throughout the towns of the occupied Soviet Union.

Grossman, a war correspondent for the popular Red Army newspaper *Krasnaya Zvezda*,

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<sup>122</sup> Timothy Snyder, "Holocaust: The Ignored Reality." *The New York Review of Books* 56 (July 16, 2009). Operation Reinhardt encompassed killing a majority of the Polish Jews (which was, at the time, the largest Jewish community in the world), at the killing camps of Treblinka, Belzec and Sobibor. An estimated 1.5 million Polish Jews were killed. For an extensive study of Operation Reinhardt, see the work by retired Yad Vashem director Yitzhak Arad, *Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka: The Operation Reinhardt Death Camp*.

was devastated upon arrival in his hometown of Berdichev, Ukraine, in 1943 to learn that his mother, along with the rest of the Jewish population, had been murdered.<sup>123</sup> Local auxiliaries had played a substantial role, tormenting their longtime Jewish neighbors and assisting the Germans in the round-ups and executions. As the Red Army later moved westward, he discovered further evidence of local collaboration in Nazi crimes throughout the formerly occupied areas. “There are no Jews in Ukraine,” Grossman wrote in 1943:

Nowhere-Poltava, Kharkov, Kremenchug, Borispol, Yagotin-in none of the cities, hundreds of towns, or thousands of villages will you see the black, tear-filled eyes of little girls; you will not hear the pained voice of an old woman; you will not see the dark face of a hungry baby. All is silence. Everything is still. A whole people has been brutally murdered... This quiet is much more frightening than tears and curses. ..This was different from the death of people in war, with weapons in their hands...This was the murder of a great and ancient professional experience, passed from one generation to another in thousands of families of craftsmen and members of the intelligentsia...<sup>124</sup>

Along with fellow author Ilya Ehrenburg and supported by the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, Grossman undertook a massive project to document wartime German crimes against Soviet Jews: *Chornaya Kniga*, or *The Black Book*, contained letters, memoirs and articles from Soviet citizens detailing atrocities that occurred in their

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<sup>123</sup> Grossman was described in the words of Simon Markish as “a Russian writer of Jewish fate.” A chemist by trade, he began writing short stories in 1934, becoming a front-line correspondent during the war. Throughout the war, he wrote fresh, factual accounts of the fighting. As the Red Army advanced into Poland in 1943 and 1944, Grossman saw the devastation that the Nazis had wreaked on the Jewish population and wrote passionate articles on Treblinka, the Warsaw ghetto uprising and Babi Yar before being commissioned by the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee for work on the Black Book. The events of the Holocaust profoundly affected the rest of his life; he did not forget over time as most did in the Soviet Union. Grossman’s paramount work, *Life and Fate*, is a culmination of the events of his life, not least of which was the power of an ideology bolstered by the state. Although it was completed in 1960, the printing was repressed (in actuality, the manuscript was literally ‘arrested’ by the KGB), and only printed in the Soviet Union in 1988. The work follows Russian Jews to death camps and gas chambers, yet it is also a striking critique of Soviet oppression and anti-Semitism, and bears no resemblance to the enforced social realism literature of that period. See Alice Stone Nakhimovsky, *Russian-Jewish Literature and Identity*. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 114.

<sup>124</sup>“Ukraine without Jews” was printed in *Einikeit* (journal of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee in the Soviet Union) on November 25, 1943. Due to Stalin’s ‘Do Not Divide the Dead’ policy which stipulated that all victims of Nazism, including the Jews, were to be defined as ‘citizens of the Soviet Union,’ Grossman’s articles on the extent of the Holocaust in the East, including local collaboration, proved unwelcome to the Soviet authorities. See Vasily Grossman, *A Writer at War*, 251.

hometowns.<sup>125</sup> The authors wanted the personal accounts to restore an individuality and identity to the victims and lessen the dehumanizing impact of the staggering statistics.<sup>126</sup> They included incidents involving the collaboration of Ukrainian police and highlighted the anti-Semitic nature of the crimes. The Soviet regime suppressed the publication of the book in 1948. It did not emerge until 1980, having been smuggled to Jerusalem.<sup>127</sup>

While Grossman was the first to publish the involvement of local police forces in Nazi crimes, the historiography has grown considerably, especially within recent years. Foremost among historians studying the role of local police on the Eastern Front is Martin Dean.<sup>128</sup> Dean's archival research on the crimes of local police in Belorussia and Ukraine has reshaped the contemporary understanding of the Eastern Front by bringing the complex nature of local collaboration to the forefront of the historiography on the subject. Drawing from archives across Belarus and Ukraine, his research provides a framework for a more focused consideration of events in a single community and reflection on their meaning for the history of German crimes in the East.

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<sup>125</sup> Albert Einstein and the US Committee of Jewish Writers, Artists and Scientists proposed the initiative to compile a summary of the German atrocities committed in the Soviet Union to the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee in 1942. See Shimon Redlich, *War*, 96.

<sup>126</sup> Vasily Grossman, *Writer*, 252.

<sup>127</sup> In compiling the 'Black Book,' FSU documents show that Vasily Grossman and Ilya Ehrenburg debated the terminology to be used. Ehrenburg refused to take out the word '*politsai*', explaining that, "By '*politsai*' we understand not a German, but a traitor. Establishing just who exactly was a '*politsai*' will be very difficult. I didn't take out the word 'Jew' but I did take out the word 'Ukrainian' and wrote '*politsai*.'" In 1945 and 1947, review commissions concluded that, "too much is recounted in the sketches about the vile activity of traitors among Ukrainians, Lithuanians, et al..." and that, "The reader unwittingly gets the impression that the Germans fought against the USSR for the sole purpose of destroying the Jews...whereas Hitler's ruthless slaughters were carried out equally against Russians, Jews, Belorussians, Ukrainians, Latvians, Lithuanians and other people of the Soviet Union..." Ultimately, it was concluded that the book contained "grave political errors" and would not be published in the Soviet Union. See Zvi Gitelman, *Bitter Legacy*, 19 and Shimon Redlich, *War*, 104.

<sup>128</sup> See Martin Dean, *Collaboration*.

## *The Role of Public Memory*

Only recently have museums and historians attempted to educate the public about the atrocities that occurred in the regions of the Soviet Union under German occupation in World War II. Since the opening of the Soviet Archives in 1991, multiple in-depth historical works on the genocide on the Eastern Front have appeared.<sup>129</sup> In 2004, the Galicia Jewish Museum in Krakow, Poland was founded, the banner on its website proclaiming (in English), “The Jewish past...has become overshadowed by images of Auschwitz...but if we are to fully understand the Jewish past here, we need to explore a new iconography of the Holocaust.” Inside the former mill in Kazimierz, the historical Jewish district in Krakow, Poland, visitors find not pictures of the gas chambers and trains used to transport people to mass killing centers but large, unframed photographs of lush fields and forests, along with destroyed Jewish tombstones and temples in the open gallery.

While some historians have questioned the objectivity of collecting information through interviews and the reliability of such data more than sixty years after the fact, few have doubted Fr. Patrick Debois’ efforts to raise public awareness on the subject and

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<sup>129</sup> See, Yitzhak Arad, *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union*; Ray Brandon and Wendy Lower, eds., *The Shoah in Ukraine: History, Testimony, Memorialization*; Partick Debois, *The Holocaust by Bullets*; Geoffrey Megargee, *War of Annihilation: Combat and Genocide on the Eastern Front, 1941*; Martin Dean, *Collaboration in the Holocaust: Crimes of the Local Police in Belorussia and the Ukraine, 1941-1944*; Lucjan Dobroszycki and Jeffrey S. Gurock, *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union: studies and sources on the destruction of the Jews in the Nazi-occupied territories of the USSR, 1941-1945.*, Zvi Gitelman, ed., *Bitter Legacy: Confronting the Holocaust in the USSR*; Herbert, Ulrich, ‘Nationalsozialistische Vernichtungspolitik, 1939-1945: Neue Forschungen und Kontroversen’; Dan Stone, ed., *The Historiography of the Holocaust*; Shmuel Spector, *The Holocaust of Volhynian Jews 1941—1944*; Edward, B Westermann, *Hitler’s Police Battalions, Enforcing Racial War in the East*; Leonid Smilovitsky, “Historiography of the Holocaust in Belorussia.”; Shalom Cholawski, “The Holocaust and the Armed Struggle in Belorussia as Reflected in Soviet Historiography and in Works by Belorussian Emigres”; Yitzhak Arad, Yisrael Gutman and Abraham Margalio, eds., *Documents on the Holocaust: Selected Sources on the Destruction of the Jews of Germany, Austria, Poland, and the Soviet Union*; Leonid Rein, “Local Collaboration in the Execution of the "Final Solution" in Nazi-Occupied Belorussia.”

ensure that Jewish victims are properly memorialized.<sup>130</sup> He has challenged conventional public perspectives on the issues of memory and respect, citing, for example, an incident in the Lisinitchi forest in Lviv, Ukraine (now a public garden). Over the course of six months, from 1941-1942, 90,000 Jews were murdered there, but today there is not a single marker to indicate the fifty-seven mass graves in the forest. “The landscape of Ukraine,” he mournfully writes, “...was transforming itself under my eyes into an ocean of exterminations. The horrors of the Holocaust...unfortunately cover the whole country [Ukraine] without exception.”<sup>131</sup>

For these and other reasons, the subject has recently gained a higher public profile. The Shoah Memorial in Paris, France held a year-long temporary exhibit on Fr. Debois’ work, and the 2008 film *Defiance* on the Bielski partisans included not only a scene in which an uncovered mass grave was shown in a forest in Belarus, but one in which local Belorussian police searched for Jews and supplied relevant information to the Nazis. Following this effort to increase public awareness, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum plans to feature a special exhibition on collaboration in the coming years.

With increasing awareness comes an understandable further interest into the nature and character of such collaboration, yet public memory of local collaboration in the enormous crimes of German occupation forces in the Soviet Union remains a highly sensitive issue. Post-war Soviet policy of not ‘dividing the dead’ was an important factor in the reluctance of the authorities to permit open dialogue, as were latent nationalist sentiments in Belorussia and Ukraine. Despite the Russian publication of Ilya Ehrenberg and Vasily Grossman’s revealing *Black Book* in 1988, many former Soviet satellite

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<sup>130</sup> Patrick Debois, *The Holocaust*, 146.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

countries have yet to acknowledge officially the role of collaborators in the execution of the Holocaust. Leonid Smilovitsky writes that “The attitude toward the genocide of Jews still remains a taboo topic. The authorities in contemporary Belarus have not admitted their partial fault in the genocide of the Jews on the Republic’s territory during the war years. Belorussian history denies that the policy of genocide was first and foremost targeted at the Jews.”<sup>132</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Educating the public regarding the prominent role of auxiliary police units on the Eastern Front during the Holocaust remains the primary means of resolving the rift between the history and public memory. Historians and museums in the West have worked to challenge a long-standing status quo of disregard; the works of Vasily Grossman and Ilya Ehrenburg, Martin Dean, Fr. Debois, Geoffrey Megargee and Wendy Lower have acknowledged the reality and begun to explore the extent of collaboration in the Soviet Union more deeply, offering tentative explanations for its origins and character, while the records of the Extraordinary State Commission explicitly detail the crimes of the local police during the Holocaust. Within the field of academia, there remains no doubt that the role of the police was absolutely crucial to the Nazi intention of annihilation of the Jewish population.

Overarching German strategic goals for the Eastern Front dictated the dissolution of the ‘Judeo-Bolshevik threat’ in order to create *Lebensraum*, an effort that could not be achieved while heavily engaged in fighting the Red Army, without additional support. This lack of German manpower on the Eastern Front necessitated implementing local

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<sup>132</sup> Leonid Smilovitsky, “Ghettos,” 17.

collaborators at all levels; most infamous were local police units in every town who were intimately familiar with the language, land and people of Jewish descent in their towns. These *Schutzmannschaft* (or *Ordnungsdienst*) units aided the *Einsatzgruppen* and other German security forces in identifying Jews, forcing them into ghettos, guarding and robbing them once contained within the walls, and then escorting them to sites where they were summarily executed. In some instances, the auxiliaries directly participated in the murders.

Much of the difficulty of confronting the issue of auxiliary police involvement in the Holocaust stems from the fact that it is hard to understand why men would aid, or participate, in killing their neighbors. While no single generalization can be made for individual causes of motivation within the auxiliaries, records indicate that many men joined simply because of opportunism: during a time of war and uncertainty, a steady paycheck, employment and guaranteed food were hard to pass by. Additional motivations, such as anger towards the Russians from the 1930s, greed and the possibility of profit from plundering Jews' belongings were also factors in joining the local police units; when combined with long-standing and virulent native anti-Semitism, all reasons created an atmosphere of necessity and opportunism.

The case study from the records of the Extraordinary State Commission in Gomel, Belorussia indicate that the Holocaust there appears to have proceeded in a predictably lockstep fashion: invasion by the Germans, recruitment of a local police force, registration and ghettoization of the Jews, and eventual extermination of the Jewish population of the region. The formation of auxiliary police forces in Gomel and their role in events seem to parallel situations across Belorussia. However, Gomel differed from

other *oblasts* in two important ways: the concept of complete, general annihilation appears to have been introduced there first, along with the concept of a ghetto for isolation purposes only. There was no *Judenrat* (Jewish council) or other cultural, social, or political activities in the ghetto, and Gomel Jews were not exploited for economic purposes, which would have conformed to the broad diversity of experience during the Holocaust. In 1941-42 the Jews of Gomel were simply rounded up and executed, an extreme and horrifying chapter in modern history's most tragic story.

Much remains before the historiography of local police collaboration in the Holocaust on the Eastern Front has matured; indeed, historians have until now only skimmed the surface of the subject. Little is known about the sheer diversity of the experience across the vast number of small communities in the Soviet west; likewise, the identities and post-war fates of many collaborators remain shrouded in mystery. Quite apart from scholarly inquiries, the fact of local police involvement in the Holocaust is rarely acknowledged publicly in Belarus, Lithuania and Ukraine. Article 28 in the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus (added in July 1996), under the 'Procedures Governing Access to Documents Containing Information Relating to the Secret Life of Private Citizens' denies access to information about Belorussians accused of treason, desertion or collaboration, which extends even to those who served in the Nazi's 'puppet police.'<sup>133</sup>

Such policies are particularly disturbing in light of the personal nature of the Holocaust in the Belarus. For the most part, executions of Jews in the Soviet Union were not bureaucratized and mechanical, but highly personal. As Fr. Patrick Debois writes, the

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<sup>133</sup> Ray Brandon, *The Shoah*, 14.

Holocaust in the East was, “A man assassinating another man.”<sup>134</sup> Inability or unwillingness to confront the integral role of local police is to distort the unique historical character of the events and undermines a more thoroughgoing understanding of genocide and its perpetrators.

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<sup>134</sup> Patrick Debois, *The Holocaust by Bullets*, 55.

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