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Introduction

This book is the result of a conference held at Södertörn University College and Uppsala University in April 2002 entitled “*Focus: Reichskommissariat Ostland – Collaboration and Resistance during the Holocaust*”. The intention of the organizers was to bring together scholars doing primary research on an aspect of the Holocaust which has received some treatment, but not as much as might be imagined given the centrality of the region to events of the Holocaust. What happened during the Second World War in the region which the Germans themselves dubbed *Reichskommissariat Ostland*, that is, the countries of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Belarus (White Ruthenia) is of central importance for a deeper understanding for a host of important questions regarding the Holocaust. Therefore, we wished to assist in on-going international research efforts to cast new and better light on some of the questions raised by any consideration of the region. Not least, we were eager to locate younger scholars from the countries in question who are utilizing archival collections unavailable prior to the fall of the Soviet Union. We believed as well that present-day scholars from this region are, it seems fair to say, more imbued with the research methods and ethics of modern scholarship than their predecessors.

Because so much of the killing took place in this region, beginning as is well known with Operation Barbarossa in June 1941, this aspect of the Holocaust has been told before and much has been known. The policies of and actions taken by the Germans have been the subject of considerable research and analysis in past decades, beginning not least with Raul Hilberg’s seminal *The Destruction of the European Jews*, through such general histories as Lucy Dawidowicz’s *The War Against the Jews*, Martin Gilbert’s *The Holocaust: the Jewish Tragedy* and Leny Yahil’s *The Holocaust. The Fate of European Jewry, 1932–1945*.¹ Some survivor testimony from this region

1 Hilberg, Raul, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (New York and London: Holmes & Meier 1985); Dawidowicz, Lucy, *The War Against the Jews* (Harmondsworth: Pen-

has been published in various languages, including Hebrew and English, most often in small editions rarely available in even some of the better research libraries. But these past studies, surveys and memoirs have lacked both the advantage of using newly uncovered material or from our ever advancing understanding of key aspects of the Holocaust large and small – an understanding which was unimaginable prior to the massive burst of research and publication which took place throughout the 1990s.

The organizers wanted especially to illuminate specialist treatments using, as noted, previously unavailable documents of the German occupation forces and local self-government agencies in local archives, investigations by the secret police and court records of trials against collaborators made by Soviet authorities just after the end of the Second World War as well as oral histories recorded in recent years.

We wanted as well to plunge explicitly into two of the most controversial aspects of Holocaust history of this region: that is the collaboration of the local population with the Nazi extermination policy and the effect of local Jewish resistance to these policies. Although it has long been known that Hilberg was incorrect when he asserted that Jewish resistance was non-existent, it seemed important to discuss what is known today about the various resistance groups and movements, both within ghettos and among partisan groups. Even more acute was the need for some renewed and informed discussion about the nature and extent of the collaboration of domestic actors with the Germans in the persecution and killing of the native Jewish populations. Anyone informed of the situation knows how acrimonious this issue has been through the decades since the war and again, it seemed that because of the time which has lapsed since the Baltic states regained their independence, a more informed and source based discussion would be possible. Yet even on the “neutral” ground provided the participants in Sweden, this issue clearly remains a painful and controversial one in which discussion easily deteriorates into one of sharp accusations and defensive responses. It would be fair to say that this volume does not shy away from issues of controversy and scholarly conflict, nor does it claim to present resolutions to the central controversies. While there is

guin 1990); Gilbert, Martin *The Holocaust: the Jewish Tragedy* (London: Fontana 1987); Yahil, Leny, *The Holocaust. The Fate of European Jewry, 1932–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press 1990).

some agreement about what happened, differing interpretations and perspectives, naturally enough, remain. On the one hand there are some who adopt an apologetic stance, who try to find extenuating circumstances and who try to minimize the number of collaborators and the importance of their activities. On the other are those who expand the definition of collaboration to civil administrators active in fields not directly connected with the extermination of the region's Jews.

There are more reasons for the importance of research on genocide in this part of Eastern Europe than that the story is not one of the most well known aspects of the Holocaust. One of the most important reasons for further research into this region is the fact that a deeper understanding of Nazi policy here sheds essential light on the debate amongst Holocaust historians which refuses to go away, namely, when did Hitler make the "global decision" to exterminate European Jewry. This remains somewhat obscure and retains its importance for understanding, among other things, the timing and nature of collaboration in the *Ostland*.² The chronology of killing in this region, and the decision making behind it remain unknown to the broader public, who continue to believe that the Wannsee Conference is when Hitler (who of course wasn't even present, as neither was Himmler) made the decision to kill the Jews.

The brutal reality, proximity and primitiveness of much of the killing of many hundreds of thousands of Jews in this region also must be better understood and widely mediated for again, much of the general public believes that most or all Jews died in the gas chambers of such camps as Auschwitz-Birkenau, Majdanek or Treblinka. For the Germans, the killings in the east showed that it was possible to kill constantly growing numbers of Jews, thus removing such alternative plans as the Madagascar deportation scheme from the Nazi agenda.³ For instance, the murder of mainly Jewish adult men began immediately with the invasion of the Soviet Union and continued for more than a month, but who gave the orders, and when, to include women and children? We do know that a decisive step

- 2 For one of the most recent and clearest expositions of the current discussion regarding the timing and significance of the decision, see Christopher Browning's collection of essays, *Nazi Policy, Jewish Workers, German Killers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000).
- 3 Browning, Christopher, *Fateful Months. Essays on the Emergence of the Final Solution* (New York and London: Holmes & Meier 1991).

towards genocide was taken in the middle of August 1941 when the *Einsatzgruppen* began reporting that they were also murdering Jewish women and children.⁴

While our understanding and perceptions of the Hitlerian “polyocracy” has evolved, there remains no question that the decision making process in Nazi Germany was confused and confusing, often competitive and illogical, and surprisingly decentralized – at least according to normal governmental structures extant throughout Europe during the first half of the last century. Contemporary failure to understand “what actually happened” is caused not least by an unrealistic ambition to identify a single Nazi practice that was used at all times and in all conditions and places. While there existed clear civil and military formal chains of command, there also existed parallel and rival structures which had grown out of the Nazi party and which took orders directly from Hitler and other leading party officials. It thus remains difficult to formulate clear, concise and comprehensive conclusions that are at the same time well informed about Nazi occupation policy and the Holocaust in Eastern Europe. This is not caused by a lack of documentation, but rather since the opening of archives, a surfeit of documentation that is sometimes contradictory and sometimes confusing.⁵

Although Reinhard Heydrich’s RSHA (*Reichssicherheitshauptamt*) played the central role in coordinating, from Berlin, the various aspects of Nazi genocide, it was not unusual that local administrators throughout the east and not only the *Ostland* were often not immediately informed of changes of policy towards the Jews until these were already being implemented elsewhere. In truth, however, with regard to the continent-wide genocide of the Jews, coordination between the SS, the *Wehrmacht*, and the various civilian agencies, the range of confusion is not very great and the “inefficiencies” always overcome. For there was a singular unanimity throughout

4 Förster, Jürgen, “The Relation Between Operation Barbarossa as an Ideological War of Extermination and the Final Solution” in David Cesarani (ed.), *The Final Solution. Origins and Implementation* (London: Routledge 1994) p. 93. See also Breitman, Richard, *Official Secrets: What the Nazis Planned and what the British and Americans Knew* (London: Penguin 2000).

5 For an effective summary in English of recent German research into this often vexing question of Nazi decision making, especially in the occupied East, see Herbert, Ulrich (ed.) *National Socialist Extermination Policies. Contemporary German Perspectives and Controversies* (New York & Oxford: Berghahn Books 2000).

the organs and personnel of Nazi Germany that the Jews should die, particularly since the war in the East seemed to create an unprecedented opportunity to eliminate what so many understand as a “racial threat” to the purity of Aryan Germany – the “rightful” ruler of Europe.

It is also impossible to give a simple statement about German policy towards the states they were occupying. Thus understanding the incentives and motives among the occupied peoples to collaborate and or to resist changed throughout the course of the war. Collaboration was easiest to motivate immediately after the German occupation as it forced out the unpopular Soviet regime caught in the act of exiling the Baltic political and intellectual elites. Not surprisingly, cooperation declined and armed resistance increased after the Germans began losing ground in the Soviet Union and it seemed that they might lose the war.

The details of the notorious Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of late August 1939 are well known so they do not need to be reviewed here. It is salient, however, for readers of this volume to understand that though the Soviet Union occupied eastern Poland in the middle of September 1939, it did not at that time move against the Baltic countries. The Soviets permitted the Germans to grasp a large part of Poland east of Warsaw and the Vistula River, while they drew Lithuania into their sphere of influence without German complaint. Stalin put pressure on the Baltic countries and pacts of “mutual assistance” turned them into Kremlin protectorates, although the move did not take away their independence. Lithuanian territory was widened in October 1939 to include the previously Polish city of Vilnius. The Soviet Union waited about one year before taking full advantage of the secret protocol giving it free hands in the Baltic countries. Then, on 15 June 1940, Stalin ordered Lithuania annexed while waiting another two days before ordering the move into Latvia and Estonia.

Thus all parts of what became *Reichskommissariat Ostland* belonged to the Soviet Union prior to the German invasion, although most had only been since mid-June 1940. Soviet annexation meant immediate and often brutal integration into the political, social and economic policies of the Soviet Communist Party. A considerable influx of party officials took place after June 1940, with the creation of a domestic party apparatus. In general members of minorities, like the Jews, proved easier to recruit than members of the majority nationality. Although very brief, the period of what is often called “the first Soviet occupation” was an extremely trauma-

tizing one for all three of the nation-states, with the brutality culminating in the weeks and days before the German invasion with the mass deportation from these countries to Siberia of political and social elites (including, on a per capita basis, even more Jews than other groups). Beginning on 14 June 1941, an estimated 10,000 Estonians, 15,000 Latvians and 20,000 Lithuanians were sent to Siberia and the Soviet Far North, with the deportations proceeding literally up to the arrival of German troops. And with a policy whose repercussions are still felt today in both the history and historiography of the region, the Germans exploited the deep and bitter local resentment with Soviet rule by coupling it with the long-standing Nazi ideological concept of “Judeo-Bolshevism”. This policy and its consequences created many of the still on-going disputes between Jewish survivors and the nationals of the three countries.

It is well known that the start of Operation Barbarossa on 22 June 1941 caught the Soviet leadership shockingly unprepared. The German province of East Prussia bordered Soviet-occupied Lithuania, providing a forward launching site for the almost immediate occupation of that country. Belarus bordered the so-called General Gouvernement of German-occupied Poland and also fell almost immediately, with Minsk falling on 28 June. The Germans moved into southern Latvia on 29 June and Riga was taken by 1 July although it took another ten days for the entire country to be occupied by German troops. The rapidity of the German invasion and occupation is the cause of the heated discussion regarding the short interim, referred to by some scholars as an *interregnum*, between the withdrawal of the local Soviet governments and the take over by German authorities. For in both countries murderous pogroms against local Jewish populations did take place, and the degree they are to be understood as “spontaneous” or as the result of German propaganda and/or orders remains a source of dispute, not least within public opinion in these countries and even still amongst historians – several of which treat this subject in the present volume.

The conquest of Estonia began somewhat later and there was more time for the Soviets to organize a stronger opposition to the Germans and, crucially, to evacuate some of the country’s small Jewish population. Tallinn fell on 27 August and fighting continued in some parts of the country into the autumn. Thus there was no *interregnum* of power and little opportunity to instigate popular pogroms. Therefore in Estonia and in Belarus the issue of collaboration revolves mainly around local people who served the

Germans in the police, auxiliary police, prison services and so called “self-defense” units.

Almost from the start of Barbarossa the murder of Jews, Communist functionaries, and other targeted groups was carried out with a rapid, overwhelming brutality which the Germans made very little effort to hide from the native populations. In Lithuania and Latvia the pre-war Jewish populations were devastated in the first six months after the invasion, with the majority of the Jews of both countries murdered by the end of December 1941.⁶

There is some uncertainty as to whether the Roma were targeted from the very start of the invasion. For instance, the situation in the territories/regions seized from the Soviet Union differed from that in Nazi-occupied Serbia where Roma were clearly identified alongside the Jews as hostages from the start of the summer of 1941. Both groups were murdered in reprisals for partisan attacks against German forces. Serbian Gypsies were taken into custody from September 1941 and were often subjected to mass executions, sometimes using gas vans, and sometimes together with Jewish prisoners. In *Reichskommissariat Ostland* some individual Roma are noted early on in the reports from the killing squads and the concentration camps. However only by 4 December 1941 do we find a document in which *Reichskommissar* Hinrich Lohse states that Gypsies should be treated in the “same way as the Jews”.⁷ According to Anton Weiss-Wendt in his contribution to this volume, in Estonia mass incarceration of Roma occurred only in February 1943 in prisons and camps, with most of them executed in the autumn of 1943. In Latvia half of the country’s Gypsy population was murdered between April 1942 and March 1943.

We have noted that in the conquered Soviet areas the mass murders took place not after long distance deportation to specially built killing centers, but rather usually only a short distance from the locations where the Jews lived before the German occupation. Many hundreds of thousands were murdered literally within hearing distance of their local com-

6 Porat, Dina, “The Holocaust in Lithuania. Some Unique Aspects” in Cesarani, David (ed.), *The Final Solution. Origins and Implementation* (London: Routledge 1994) pp. 159–174.

7 Zimmermann, Michael, *Rassenutopie und Genozid. Die nationalsozialistische “Lösung der Zigeunerfrage”*, Hamburger Beiträge zur Sozial- und Zeitgeschichte vol 33 (Hamburg 1996); Wippermann, Wolfgang, *Wie die Zigeunere: Antisemitismus und Antiziganismus im Vergleich* (Berlin: Elefant Press 1997).

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