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Investigating Nazi Crimes in Byelorussia: Challenges and Lessons

by
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Since May 1992 I have worked as a historian for the Crimes Against Humanity and War Crimes Section of Canada's Department of Justice. Like my colleague Howard Margolian, I have been in the fortunate position to research the Holocaust and other German crimes as a historian and as a member of an official war crimes investigations team. One of the first lessons I learned was that, while there are many similarities, considerable differences exist between the two occupations. Prosecutors and courts are not interested in historiographical schools and erudite speculation; they want the facts of a case. After a few weeks at the Section, I began to write like a policeman or a prosecutor, dealing exclusively with what could be proven on the basis of witness testimony and documentary evidence and paying attention to the minutest detail rather than speculating what might have been and identifying historical trends. To be sure, like the other historians, I have continued to write more traditional research papers. However, these have been written as historical background reports for the Section's attorneys and always with a view toward obtaining convictions or denaturalizations instead of making contributions to the body of academic knowledge.

It is now almost 51 years after the end of the Second World War. It is safe to say that the era of war crimes investigations spawned by this conflict is nearing its end. At this time, Australia has already closed its Special Investigations Unit. Its Canadian, U.S. and German counterparts are still operating, although they will undoubtedly close their doors within the next few years. British authorities recently filed suit against Serafimovich, the chief of a Byelorussian indigenous police unit. His case may well be the last western war crimes trial. Therefore, this conference offers us an opportunity to take stock of what has been learned during the past five decades and to discuss what remains to be discovered. The territory for which I have been responsible as a war crimes researcher is Byelorussia and I would like to use this territory as the basis for my paper. Consequently, I think it would be best if I provided you first with some general information about Byelorussia under Nazi occupation and the crimes committed by the occupiers and their indigenous helpers.

Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, without warning or justification, along a front stretching in excess of 1,000 miles. The German attack - code-named Operation "Barbarossa" - was carried out by three Army Groups: North, Center and South. Based on the premise that Germany's forces would inflict a crushing defeat on the Soviet Red Army by the fall, the plans called for Army Group Center to take Byelorussia and its capital Minsk on the way to the final conquest of Smolensk and Moscow. Successfully employing blitzkrieg tactics, German tank and motorized armored

divisions did in fact inflict humiliating defeats on the enemy and conquer vast amounts of Byelorussian territory within a matter of days. Minsk fell to the invaders as early as the end of June and by mid-July almost the entire Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic was under German control. (1)

Administratively, the territory of Byelorussia, which the Germans called "Weißruthenien (White Ruthenia)," was divided into two main areas for most of the German occupation. (2) Roughly the eastern third comprised the rear area of Army Group Center and was administered by the military. The western two-thirds was put under civilian administration by the Reichs Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories (RmfdbO) in September 1941 and named the Generalkommissariat Weißruthenien. The dividing line between civil and military administration ran north to south approximately 50 km east of Minsk, roughly from Disna to Borisov to Petrikov. Expecting that the front would continue to move eastward, civilian officials believed that they would soon take over the eastern districts from the military as well. However, military reality, i.e. the failure of the German forces to advance farther to the East for any extended period of time, prevented the Generalkommissariat's take-over of Byelorussia in its entirety and thus the eastern third remained in Army Group Center's rear area. In this manner, Byelorussia endured three years - from June 1941 until August 1944 - of Nazi occupation.

Byelorussia's Jewish population numbered almost 1.1 million on the eve of the German invasion. In fact, many of Byelorussia's largest cities - Minsk, Vitebsk, Mogilev, Gomel, Bobruisk, Orsha - had Jewish majorities. The invading Germans began the murder of Byelorussian Jews soon after their arrival. Jews who were not killed during the initial operations were forced to move into ghettos. These ghettos were systematically liquidated from the fall of 1941 to the fall of 1943. German authorities also accused the Jews of being the driving force behind the Soviet partisan movement, whose members began to operate in growing numbers behind German lines in the spring of 1942. For example, Wilhelm Kube, the Commissar General for White Ruthenia, equated Jews with partisans in the same report in which he proudly told his superiors about the murder of 55,000 Byelorussian Jews during a ten-week period in the spring and summer of 1942. (3)

Most Nazi crimes in Byelorussia, particularly the murder of Byelorussian Jewry, were committed by mobile forces. Units belonging to two of Heydrich's Einsatzgruppen - A and B - were operating in Byelorussia. They received assistance from regular German police battalions and Waffen-SS units. To be sure, some of the Einsatzgruppen headquarters became stationary at the end of 1941 for the purpose of establishing an SS/police structure in the occupied Soviet Union. Yet, the occupiers' killing operations never really lost their mobile character throughout the occupation owing to the expanse of the areas to which these forces were assigned. After the war, members of the Einsatzgruppen were the subjects of several trials, most notably that of Otto Ohlendorf and 20 other officers before a U.S. military tribunal from July 1947 to April 1948. (4) Beginning in 1950 West German courts also tried Einsatzgruppen men. (5) In addition to

the courts, historians also began to investigate the Einsatzgruppen and publish their findings. (6)

While the history of the Einsatzgruppen is by now well-documented, the same cannot be said for most of the indigenous units who assisted the Germans in the murder of Soviet Jews and gentiles. Some - like the Arjas Commando, the Kaminsky Brigade and the SS unit "Druzhina" - have attained great notoriety. However, historians have paid little attention to the large numbers of lesser-known indigenous "security" forces without which the Germans would have encountered greater difficulty in liquidating entire ghettos and staging massive murder and pillage operations disguised as anti-partisan actions. The Germans established two types of local units: the Schutzmannschaft and the Ordnungsdienst. The former generally operated in areas under civilian administration and fell within the SS/police command structure; the latter was established in army and army group rear areas and placed under the authority of local and district military commanders. Historians have only recently begun to study the Schutzmannschaften and the Ordnungsdienst. (7)

Large numbers of indigenous forces were active in Byelorussia. A compilation of forces stationed in the area of the Higher SS and Police Leader for Russia-Center and White Ruthenia dated May 1, 1943, lists 19 indigenous Schutzmannschaften. Of these, 17 were assigned to the SS and Police Leader for White Ruthenia in Minsk. (8) Four were Lithuanian, two Latvian, three Byelorussian, seven Ukrainian, and one - SS unit "Druzhina" - consisted of 2,000 Russians and Ukrainians who distinguished themselves for their extremely brutal conduct during a major anti-partisan operation code-named "Cottbus" in May and June 1943. (9) These forces were mobile, although it must be stressed that the Germans also established large numbers of stationary Schutzmannschaften whose operations were limited to specific towns or districts. The commanders of mobile Schutzmannschaften were German police or gendarmerie officers, while the rank-and-file consisted of indigenous volunteers. Most mobile Schutzmannschaften were battalions with personnel strengths between 350 and 450; the personnel strengths of stationary Schutzmannschaften were usually lower. As a result of desertions and casualties suffered in battles with Soviet partisans, there was considerable turnover. Consequently, the number of those who served in a given Schutzmannschaft throughout its history is undoubtedly much higher than the number of those who joined initially. (10)

There is considerable documentary evidence and witness testimony to establish the participation of Schutzmannschaften in the commission of Nazi crimes. From the outset, their members took part in the murder of Jews and gentiles. For example, in October and November 1941 Lithuanian Schutzmannschaft Battalion 12 killed thousands of civilians in cities and towns throughout central Byelorussia. Attached to German Police Reserve Battalion 11, it participated in the murder of the Jewish population of Slutsk. The brutality of the forces carrying out the executions was such that the leading German civilian administrator in Slutsk sent a lengthy report to his superior, strongly protesting the conduct of the police forces. (11)

Considerably less evidence exists with respect to the Ordnungsdienst's participation in Nazi crimes. However, there are numerous indications that its role transcended that of a simple indigenous security force for the military's rear areas. For example, the commander of Army Group Center Rear Area, General Max von Schenckendorff, described the Ordnungsdienst as "first and foremost an organ of the SD." (12) More telling, though, is a document referring to Ordnungsdienst men in Chaussy as guarding "abandoned Jewish furniture." (13) Similarly, Feldkommandantur (district military headquarters) (V)200 in the Dobrush-Klincy area reported that the indigenous unit it had established was guarding Jews. (14) Further, one of the first explicit duties of the OD in Smolensk was "to control the Jewry," particularly by preventing Jews from settling outside the ghetto which the invaders had established (15). Clearly, then, both the Schutzmannschaften and the Ordnungsdienst warrant further historical inquiry to clarify issues such as organization, duties, membership, local variations, involvement in criminal activity etc.

One of the main tasks of indigenous forces was to assist the Germans in the "pacification" of the occupied areas. This included combatting the growing Soviet partisan movement. SS and police officials regularly used mobile Schutzmannschaft forces during many major anti-partisan operations in Byelorussia. The operational orders and battle reports filed by SS and police commanders like Curt von Gottberg leave no doubt as to Schutzmannschaft involvement. The vast majority of such operations were launched to terrorize, plunder and decimate the local gentile population and, of course, to murder the remaining Jews. Some, like the above-mentioned Operation "Cottbus" or Operation "Hermann," resulted in heinous crimes committed by German and indigenous police forces. German records show that old men, women and children were routinely herded into barns which were subsequently set on fire. In fact, German civilian administrators were very concerned about the impact of such atrocities on the surviving civilian population. One report described the political effects of the killing of innocent Byelorussian women and children as "disastrous." (16)

The Germans did not rely solely on major operations to combat the partisans. In fact, much of their war against the movement took place in countless smaller battles. Such encounters usually did not involve large indigenous forces. Nonetheless, native collaborators were crucial to this effort as well. The outcome was identical to that of the large operations: dead villagers, devastated villages, plundered livestock and crops. The crimes committed as part of the occupiers' war against partisans, and particularly the involvement of indigenous personnel, calls for further historical research. What motivated some Soviet citizens to take up arms against and take part in the brutal slaughter and plunder of their fellow-countrymen? Who did most of the dirty work, the Germans or their local helpers? How did many of those who served in indigenous units manage to settle in western countries after the war and lead normal lives? Why have western governments and courts been largely unsuccessful in bringing these men to justice? Historians have yet to provide answers to these questions.

Soviet courts were much more active and successful in this area. Large numbers of indigenous collaborators were tried and convicted before tribunals of the Soviet secret

police, the NKVD and its successors. They began their work during the closing months of the war, lasting well into the 1980s. Their modus operandi, particularly their utter disregard for the rights of defendants, appears appalling in the west. Further, one cannot escape the impression that these trials served a political purpose as well as justice; Stalin's and later governments undoubtedly wished to impress the cost of treason on the Soviet population. (17)

I have examined many volumes of Soviet trial records in the course of my work. All of these proceedings dealt with indigenous collaborators; some held relatively high ranks, most were rank-and-file members of Schutzmannschaften or Ordnungsdienst units. The tribunal records of the late 1940s and early 1950s are remarkably short, typically consisting of one, perhaps two volumes. Almost all trials involved multiple defendants. They were preceded by lengthy interrogations on the part of the secret police. At times, defendants were subjected to 20 or more sessions of intense questioning. The vast majority of defendants broke down, admitting their guilt and implicating numerous others, who were promptly arrested or, if they could not be located, became the subjects of systematic investigations into their whereabouts. Surprisingly, even during Stalin's day, only a minority of defendants received the death penalty; most were sentenced to ten or twenty-five years in a labor camp. Many of these defendants benefitted from Khrushchev's amnesty.

Over time, the records of Soviet trials became longer. By the 1980s many consisted of multi-volume sets. The proceedings continued to involve multiple-defendants and numerous, lengthy pre-trial interrogations. However, the newer records include considerably more evidence than those produced during Stalin's last years. For example, many feature copies of crucial captured German documents as well as photographs of the scene of the crime. Prosecutors also incorporated the testimony of survivors to a greater extent, in contrast to earlier trials which had relied for the most part on the testimony of indigenous collaborators who had served in the same unit as the accused.

If the Soviet successor states ever decide to open these records to the public, they would without doubt constitute valuable historical sources. To be sure, western scholars would have to exercise caution, taking into account Soviet legal practices and the trials' political and propagandistic functions. Nonetheless, such records would enhance our knowledge and understanding of indigenous collaborators and their units as well as their involvement in the murder of Jewish and gentile civilians.

Western scholars will also benefit from the countless captured German documents stored in archives throughout the former Soviet Union. I have visited and examined the holdings of the State Central Archive in Minsk and all six State Regional Archives in the Republic of Belarus, located at Minsk, Brest, Grodno, Vitebsk, Mogilev, and Gomel. Three - Vitebsk, Mogilev, and Gomel - are best suited for research on German military administration in general and the Ordnungsdienst in particular. One - Grodno - contains numerous files relating to Bezirk Bialystok. The remaining archives hold documents on all aspects of the civilian administration; SS/police in the Generalkommissariat White Ruthenia, including Schutzmannschaften; the treatment of the indigenous population; the

murder and systematic plunder of the Jews; the reaction of gentiles to the murder of the Jews etc. Three of the documents which have touched me personally the most are located in Minsk and Brest. One deals with a Jewish boy and a Soviet POW who were executed twice. The first execution was botched and both were able to free themselves from their grave despite serious injuries. The two were captured several days later and shot again. (18) The second discusses the shooting of an entire gypsy family as partisans. According to the German gendarmerie official who reported the execution, three adults and five children were shot. The youngest "partisan" was two months old. (19) The third describes the behavior of gentiles in Minsk during a Judenaktion in November 1942. Local Byelorussians seized the apartments and property of Jews while the ghetto was still being cleared and apparently displayed such rapacity that the police had difficulty controlling the situation. (20)

In conclusion, the historical profession has made enormous strides over the years in its investigation of the Holocaust and other Nazi crimes. Raoul Hilberg, Yehuda Bauer, Richard Breitman, Christopher Browning, Helmut Krausnick and many others have made significant contributions. At the same time, much remains to be learned and numerous sources remain to be examined. Thus, Holocaust research should continue with great intensity in the future.

Endnotes

1. Horst Boog et al, *Das deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg* (Stuttgart: DVA, 1983), 10 vols., :451-461. [Back to text]
2. The extreme southern and western portions of Byelorussia were administered differently. The southernmost areas became parts of Reichskommissariat Ukraine while the westernmost parts, including Grodno, were integrated in Bezirk Bialystok. [Back to text]
3. Kube to Reichskommissar Ostland Hinrich Lohse, 31 July 1942, Nuremberg Document 3428-PS. [Back to text]
4. Nuremberg Military Tribunal, Volume 4, U.S. vs. Otto Ohlendorf, et al (Washington: GPO, 1949). [Back to text]
5. Adalbert Rückerl, *NS-Verbrechen vor Gericht* (Heidelberg: Müller, 1982). [Back to text]
6. The best study continues to be Helmut Krausnick and Hans-Heinrich Wilhelm, *Die Truppe des Weltanschauungskrieges* (Stuttgart: DVA, 1981). [Back to text]
7. For Schutzmannschaften, see Richard Breitman, "Himmler's Police Auxiliaries in the Occupied Soviet Territories," *Simon Wiesenthal Center Annual* 7:23-39; for the Ordnungsdienst, see Theo Schulte, *The German Army and Nazi Policies in Occupied Russia* (Oxford: Berg, 1989). [Back to text]

8. Kräfteübersicht, Stand vom 1. Mai 1943, NARA, RG 242, T-175, Roll 225. [Back to text]

9. Timothy Mulligan, *The Politics of Illusion and Empire: German Occupation Policy in the Soviet Union, 1942-43* (New York: Praeger, 1988), 156-7. [Back to text]

10. For more on the structure of the Schutzmannschaften, see Breitman, "Himmler's Police Auxiliaries." [Back to text]

11. Report by Gebietskommissar Carl, 30 October 1941, in Ernst Klee et al, eds., *"Schöne Zeiten" Judenmord aus der Sicht der Täter und Gaffer* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1988), 164-7. [Back to text]

12. Der Befehlshaber des rückwärtigen Heeres-Gebiet Mitte, Ia, 30.10.1941, NARA, RG 242, T-501, Roll 1. [Back to text]

13. Inf.Rgt.350 to Sich.Div.221, 1.11.1941, BA-MA, RH 26-221/22. [Back to text]

14. FK (V)200 to Sich.Div.221, 19.10.1941, BA-MA, RH 26-221/22. [Back to text]

15. Ereignismeldung Nr. 70, 1.9.1941, NARA, RG 242, T-175, Roll 233, Frames 2722148-153. [Back to text]

16. Lohse to the Reich Minister for the Occupied Eastern Territories Rosenberg, 18 June 1943; and Kube to Lohse, 5 June 1943, Nuremberg Document 135-R. [Back to text]

17. Eberhart Jäckel et al., *Enzyklopädie des Holocaust* (Berlin: Argon, 1993), 2:1041-42. [Back to text]

18. Police Report, 15 October 1942, Brest State Regional Archive, 995/1/7. [Back to text]

19. Police Report, 28 August 1942, Brest State Regional Archive, 995/1/7. [Back to text]

20. Correspondence, Generalkommissariat Weißruthenien, 16.11.1942, Minsk Central State Archive, 370/1/486. [Back to text]

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