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The German concept of “self-cleansing actions” (*Selbstreinigungsaktionen*) – formulation, implementation, oblivion, and suppression

Zarys treści: Ponad ćwierć wieku minęło od odkrycia przez reżyser filmów dokumentalnych Agnieszkę Arnold faktów dotyczących „akcji samooczyszczającej” w Jedwabnem. Dość krótkie zainteresowanie wspomnianym problemem ze strony mediów i historyków nie przyniosło wyjaśnienia całości „kompleksu Jedwabnego”. Nadal niewiele wiemy o działaniach związanych z zainicjowaniem i przeprowadzaniem, a w zasadzie inspirowaniem przez Niemców i Austriaków z *Einsatzgruppen* ludobójczych „Selbstreinigungsaktionen” na obszarach tyłowych wszystkich niemieckich Grup Armii (*Heeresgruppen*). Rumuńskie poczynania miały nieco inny przebieg, choć sprowadzały się również do eksterminacji ludności żydowskiej na odzyskiwanych ziemiach, które Sowietci anektowali w 1940 roku. W potocznej świadomości tak zwane – błędnie określane – pogromy ograniczały się do Podlasia, Kowna i Lwowa. Faktycznie rozgrywały na całości „skrwawionych ziem” od Generalnego Gubernatorstwa aż po Kaukaz. Warty podkreślenia jest fakt praktycznego nieistnienia określenia „Selbstreinigungsaktionen” w dyskursie naukowym (wystarczy wpisać ten termin do wyszukiwarki internetowej). Niepokojące jest całkowite zaprzestanie badania tego ludobójczego epizodu Szoa – oczywiście w ramach międzynarodowego projektu naukowego, wykluczającego podejrzenia stroniczej eksploracji.

Content outline: Over a quarter of a century has passed since film documentary director Agnieszka Arnold discovered previously unknown information on the “self-cleansing action” in Jedwabne. The brief period of interest taken in this subject by the media and historians did not bring a thorough explanation of the “Jedwabne complex”. We still know little of how the Germans and Austrians forming part of *Einsatzgruppen* instigated and implemented, or instead inspired, genocidal *Selbstreinigungsaktionen* taking place in the rear area of all German army groups (*Heeresgruppen*). The Romanians adopted a slightly different strategy, although it, too, resulted in the extermination of the Jewish population in the territories recovered after their seizure by the Soviets in 1940. In popular understanding of the issue, the so-called pogroms (although this is not a correct term) occurred only in Podlasie/Podlachia/Podlachien region, Kovno/Kauen/Kaunas, and Lvov/Lemberg/Lviv. In reality, their scope spanned the entirety of the “Bloodlands”, from the General Government to the Caucasus. It is important to note that

the term *Selbstreinigungssaktionen* is practically absent from scholarly discourse (suffice it to type it in an Internet search engine). It is worrying that this genocidal episode of the Shoah goes nearly unstudied – of course, as part of international research initiatives free from accusations of biased exploration.

Słowa kluczowe: Szoa, akcje samooczyszczające, *Selbstreinigungssaktionen*, (tak zwane) pogromy, eksterminacja Żydów, *Einsatzgruppen*, *Teilkommandos*, okupacja niemiecka, SS, *Ordnungspolizei*

Keywords: Shoah, self-cleansing actions, *Selbstreinigungssaktionen*, (so-called) pogroms, extermination of Jews, *Einsatzgruppen*, *Teilkommandos*, German occupation, SS, *Ordnungspolizei*

Introduction

The area which became the scene of German-inspired “self-cleansing actions” (*Selbstreinigungssaktionen*) aligned with the territory of the Pale of Permanent Jewish Settlement (*черта оседлости черты постоянной еврейской оседлости*) which had been part of the Russian Empire in the years 1791–1917 and covered the so-called “Stolen Lands”, that is easternmost provinces of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. So called the Pale of Settlement was the only zone in the newly acquired Russian territory where the tsars allowed Jews to live. It was also the site of the most violent pogroms of the nineteenth and the twentieth century. The Germans selected this particular area for a reason – the fertile lands of the new *Reichskommissariate* were to be settled by German colonists after the victorious war of the *Herrenvolk* and moulded into a National Socialist Arcadia, a “land of milk and honey”. The first people to be removed were the residents of shtetls, towns, and cities located in the German rear areas of three army groups – many of them fell victim to *Selbstreinigungssaktionen*.

It is necessary to begin with establishing the exact definitions of the terms “pogrom” and “self-cleansing action” – they seem synonymous, but as always, the devil is in the details. Since the late nineteenth century, the word “pogrom”, a borrowing from the Russian *погром*, has connoted mass violent attacks against members of national minority groups, primarily Jews. The press has since usurped the term as a rhetorical weapon wielded at any instance of violence directed against a stigmatised national or religious group. In pogroms, acts of physical violence were often accompanied by individual or mass destruction of private property belonging to the oppressed group and real estate associated with it, with vandalism focusing primarily on workplaces and desecrating religious sites. Pogroms would at times erupt spontaneously, for instance, when heated conflicts between neighbours would come to a boil; other times, they were planned by the authorities, which purposefully antagonised people and goaded them into violence. The concept of the pogrom was developed in the minds of Russian *chinovniks* in the Pale of Settlement – an area which aligned almost perfectly with the territory of the Stolen

Lands – in search of a way of quickly finding, indicting, and repressing the enemies of the Romanov court with the approval of the authorities.¹

The assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881 by the revolutionary terrorist Narodnaya Volya organisation became a catalyst for a two-year counterrevolutionary campaign launched by the *nachalstvo*. It soon took the form of virtually uncontrollable violent outbursts against Jews in the western gubernyas of Tsarist Russia. The towns and villages of the “черты постоянной еврейской оседлости” were swept by a wave of violence hitherto unprecedented in the history of modern Europe encompassing over 250 instances of mass physical assaults on Jewish residents of the area, accompanied by the so-called “black repatriation”, that is forced resettlement of Jews to the “черты оседлости”. The Russian authorities falsely and collectively put the blame for the assassination of the tsar on all Jews.

The same area saw another wave of steered incidents in the years 1903–07, this time associated with the persecution and expropriation of anti-tsarist revolutionaries by the supporters of counterrevolution. The growing social discontent was additionally stirred by the Russian government. The moods soon became even more heated as Russia suffered a defeat in the war against Japan, and the revolutionary struggle was intensifying. The reactionaries, especially the members of the Black Hundreds, answered with yet another wave of violence, thrice as big as the previous one, coming to encompass a total of 690 pogroms and other assaults on Jews. This time, physical acts were supported by more refined actions, such as the development of antisemitic propaganda in the form of the fully fabricated *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and other hateful pamphlets. The press supporting the Tsarist rule had free rein to spread anti-Jewish and antisemitic propaganda openly.

The last wave of mass killings (this time additionally fuelled by Germanophobia) began after the outbreak of the First World War with Russia’s successive failures against Germany and Austria-Hungary. This time, the catalyst was the Colonel Sergey Nikolayevich Myasoedov affair, followed by an increasing number of anti-Jewish accusations. The scale of violence grew to encompass 1,326 pogroms and other incidents, with a total of 50,000–60,000 Jews murdered until the end of the Russian Civil War (in which the Bolshevik’s 1st Cavalry Army gained particular infamy) and other armed conflicts in Eastern Europe. Here, however, it needs to be emphasised that the term “Jewish pogrom” is too broadly applied to events taking place in the territory of Poland in the years 1918–39, which were often instances of riots, unrests erupting on economic grounds, or results of conflicts between neighbours. Naturally, it is important to pay great attention to every antagonism’s psychological aspects and meticulously track the sources of

¹ The Russians excluded Courland with Polish Livonia from the partitioned Polish territory incorporated into the “черты постоянной еврейской оседлости”, which also came to include Besarabia and the northern shore of the Black Sea with Crimea. Exclusive enclaves were created in Sevastopol and around the tsar’s family residence in Yalta, as well as in Kyiv and Mykolaiv.

disputes/rows/tensions embedded in the emotional, ideological, customary, and religious spheres, especially if criminal acts accompany them.²

Similarly, it seems unwarranted to define *Selbstreinigungskaktionen*, a German enhancement of the Russian method, as pogroms, even though both were means of funnelling murderous instincts purportedly dormant in Eastern Europeans. The Germans thoroughly analysed the earlier Russian conceptualisations of pogroms, drew some conclusions, and fine-tuned the method of getting rid of Jews at the hands of the local population. They similarly took on board the Turkish and Kurdish experience during the Armenian genocide and their own history with the mass extermination of the Herero and Namaqua people. This is where the difference lies between pogroms and “self-cleansing actions”.

Firstly, the Germans forbade the mindless destruction of real estate or, in fact, any private property of the victims of *Selbstreinigungskaktionen*. The most valuable Jewish assets could be requisitioned, and the rest left to the locals as a means of very particular “payment” for active participation in the *Selbstreinigungskaktionen* – previously, entire Jewish quarters and districts had been set on fire.

Secondly, each *Selbstreinigungskaktion* followed a planned schedule of events, with local communities “self-cleansing” themselves of their Jewish neighbours under the supervision of a German/Austrian platoon or company aiming their repeating rifles or machine guns, ready to fire at any show of defiance from the victims and/or the local perpetrators. The actions of Eastern European units of auxiliary police (*Schutzmannschaften*) or the German gendarmerie were not in any way comparable to the methods of a typical killing squad (*Einsatzkommando Sonderkommando/Teilkommando*) composed of select German/Austrians officers.

² In the media, the two pogrom waves have been reconstructed in two feature films, *Fiddler on the Roof* by Norman Jewison and *Simon Magus* by Ben Hopkins. According to Nahum Gergel’s calculations, the events comprised 1236 antisemitic incidents, including 788 larger-scale pogroms with cases of murder. Shlomo Lambroza’s mental shortcuts such as “Russian Poland”, are a cause for concern, but the comparison between Eastern European pogroms and North American lynching carried out before the First World War is very interesting – this link was drawn by Hans Rogger in the conclusions to the book *Pogroms*, see: Z. Gitelman, *A Century of Ambivalence: The Jews of Russia and the Soviet Union, 1881 to the present* (Bloomington–Indianapolis, 2001), pp. 17–33, 57–58, 64–71; *Pogroms: Anti-Jewish Violence in Modern Russian History*, ed. J.D. Klier, Sh. Lambroza (Cambridge–New York, 1992) – this book includes the essays by: I.M. Aronson, ‘The Anti-Jewish Pogroms in Russia 1881’, pp. 44–62; M. Mishkinsky, ‘“Black Repartition” and the Pogroms of 1881–1882’, pp. 62–98; Sh. Lambroza, ‘The Pogroms of 1903–1906’, pp. 195–248; P. Kenez, ‘Pogroms and White ideology in Russian Civil War’, pp. 293–314. See also H. Abramson, ‘Jewish Representation in the Independent Ukrainian Governments of 1917–1920’, *Slavic Review*, vol. 50, no. 3 (1991), 542–50; H.-D. Löwe, ‘Pogroms in Russia: Explanations, Comparisons, Suggestions’, *Jewish Social Studies*, vol. 11, no. 1, New Series (2004), 16–23; A. Smoliński, ‘Rozboje, rabunki i pogromy ludności żydowskiej dokonane przez formacje 1. Armii Konnej na Ukrainie we wrześniu i październiku 1920 r.’, in: *O “czerwona” Rosję, “czerwona” Europę i “czerwony” świat. Studia o potencjale militarnych Sowietów w latach 1918–1941* (Toruń, 2015), pp. 214–26.

Thirdly, the Germans/Austrians documented all events with Leica I-III photo cameras, used in great numbers and very frequently, or Arriflex 35 film cameras allocated to every *Sonderkommando* or *Teilkommando*. Considering the original German photographic documentation from Jedwabne, it may be assumed that the meticulous Germans/Austrians produced film materials archiving the state of affairs in the Podlasie/Podlachia/Podlachien region and other occupied lands controlled by the German commanders of rear areas. Video – and often also audio – recordings made it possible to mould the propaganda reality by “exposing” the savagery of Eastern Europeans (vide: Kovno/Kauen/Kaunas and Lvov/Lemberg/Lviv). The Russians did not document the barbarism of their own citizens before 1918 and definitely not during the Revolution; if anything, it was the press which showed images of the aftermath of pogroms.

Fourthly, *Selbstreinigungsaktionen* were carried out by carefully selected officers of Ordnungspolizei, Schutzstaffel, Sicherheitspolizei, Sicherheitsdienst. They formed the elite of power ministries and were composed of ethnic Germans or Austrians. Their task was to carry out an over 12-month-long massacre of the “Bloodlands” – many times by the hands of the local Untermenschen. The Übermenschen who were most efficient in running the genocide were awarded a quick promotion. The Russian pogroms, in contrast, were not instigated by specially selected officers of rural or municipal police, the Division for the protection of the Public Security and Order (*Отделение по охране общественной безопасности и порядка*), usually called the Guard Department (*Охранное отделение*) and commonly abbreviated in modern English sources as the Okhrana (*Охрана*), or the Separate Corps of Gendarmes (*Отдельный корпус жандармов*). After receiving a telegraphic signal “from the top”, they automatically activated a network of informants responsible for wreaking havoc.

Fifthly, pogroms formed part of the cruel autocratic structure of the Tsarist regime, which, after all, was astonished at the scale of the pogroms. *Selbstreinigungsaktionen*, in contrast, were based on the conclusions drawn from pogroms to perfect the method and achieve similar aims at the hands of the local population. Untermenschen, goaded by German/Austrian Übermenschen, committed acts of genocide and mass extermination, helping fulfil the goals and designs of National Socialist Germany. They were meant to open a new chapter in history, introducing refined German culture to lands hitherto tainted by the savagery of Slavic and Jewish Untermenschen. Naturally, the former were allowed to stay in the area, working in Kolkhozes as helots, but only temporarily, until the implementation of Generalplan Ost.³

³ S. McMeekin, *The Russian Origins of the First World War* (Massachusetts–London, 2011), pp. 169–70; N.M. Naimark, ‘The Nazis and “The East”: Jedwabne’s Circle of Hell’, *Slavic Review*, vol. 61, no. 3 (2002), 476–82; T. Szarota, ‘“Selbstreinigungsaktionen” Sipo i SD na Litwie i w Polsce a udział ludności miejscowej w Holocauście (na przykładzie pogromów w Kownie i Jedwabnem)’, in: *Świat NIE-pożegnany; Żydzi na dawnych ziemiach wschodnich Rzeczypospolitej w XVIII–XX wieku*, ed. K. Jasiewicz (Warszawa–London, 2004), pp. 686–701.

Formulation

The catalyst for the refinement of pogroms in the new German conception of *Selbstreinigungsaktionen* were the ideas brewing in the minds of the management of the NSDAP Office of Foreign Affairs (Außenpolitisches Amt der NSDAP – APA NSDAP). The solutions were later developed in secret by the leading officers of the Reich Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories (Reichsministerium für die besetzten Ostgebiete – RMfdbO, Ostministerium/OMi for short) headed by Alfred Rosenberg. Just under a month later, on 29 March 1941, Rosenberg was quoted in *Völkischer Beobachter*: “The Jewish question in Europe will only be solved when the last Jew has left the European continent”. In the first two months of the activity of RMfdbO, the term “the final solution” appeared for the first time in internal correspondence, soon becoming a euphemism perfectly understood by the leading National Socialists seeking to conceal the targets of their genocidal schemes.⁴

Alfred Meyer, a high-ranking National Socialist, SA-Obergruppenführer (as well as Gauleiter des Gaus Westfalen-Nord, Reichsstattthalter in Lippe und Schaumburg-Lippe, Oberpräsidenten der Provinz Westfalen), became the *de facto* deputy of Alfred Rosenberg and the Staatssekretär at OMi. The two functions held in RmfdbO turned out to be the peak of his National Socialist career. Meyer was the forgotten proponent of the 29 May 1941 conference held as a false flag in Außenpolitisches Amt der NSDAP. Fifteen German dignitaries attended a so-called informational meeting. They were presented with four designs of pamphlets (Rosenberg himself claimed there were five) addressed to the Red Army, “to the Russian people, Ukrainians, to Caucasians, and to the people of the Baltic region”. The basic premise of the proclamations was expressed in the following statements: “The Jewish question can be solved to a large extent by giving the local population free rein for some period after taking control of a country” or: “The real oppressors will probably be handled by the nation itself, and in general, it should be assumed that the people, especially in Ukraine, will on a large scale participate in pogroms against Jews and killings of communist officials. In short, in the initial period, it is worth leaving the task of dealing with Bolshevik-Jewish oppressors to the local population and taking care of the remaining ones later, after collecting more detailed information”. This written suggestion alone, pointing out the potential of exploiting the murderous instincts of the local people, indicated that Rosenberg planned to initiate actions which Heydrich had not even been considering – the fifteen participants of the meeting immediately began to discuss

⁴ R. Bollmus, *Das Amt Rosenberg und seine Gegner. Studien zum Machtkampf im nationalsozialistischen Herrschaftssystem* (München, 2006), p. 120; P. Longerich, *Der ungeschriebene Befehl. Hitler und der Weg zur ‘Endlösung’* (München, 2001), p. 92; and E. Piper, *Alfred Rosenberg. Hitlers Chefideologe* (München, 2005), pp. 509–17.

the matter among themselves, which eventually resulted in the formulation of the concept of *Selbstreinigungsaktionen*.⁵

The activities of Ostministerium were supported by Propagandaministerium (ProMi). Even before the beginning of military operations against the USSR, in early 1941, Eberhard Taubert founded the “Vineta” Special Department – Propaganda Office [for] the Eastern Space – Incorporated association (Dienststelle “Vineta” – Propagandadienst Ostraum e.V.). The new body had its seat at 1 Viktoriastrasse in Berlin or, according to another version, at 12 Münzstrasse. For half a year, until 22 June 1941, “Vineta” operated as a secret cell of ProMi. It was initially headed by Dr Heinrich Kurtz. In September (according to another version, in November) 1941, he was succeeded by Dr Hans Humpf. The activities of “Vineta” focused on the translation and production of all sorts of posters, speeches, advertisements, pamphlets, flyers, vinyl records, and films (including local versions of German motion pictures, such as *Jew Süß – Jud Süß*, directed by Veit Harlan or *The Eternal Jew – Der ewige Jude* directed by Fritz Hippler), all addressed to the population of the occupied Soviet territories. Employed at the organisation were both Germans and Russian migrants, and later also Soviet collaborators speaking Russian, Ukrainian, Belarusian, Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Caucasian and Turkic languages. Their work enhanced the operational efficiency of OMi and Einsatzgruppen (EG) and later magnified the entire collaborationist effort in the occupied Soviet lands. The Russian group within “Vineta” boasted the largest number of employees, around 800. “Vineta” received all propaganda materials from ProMi and coordinated their contents with the Wehrmacht (Fremde Heere Ost and Abwehr), OMi, and the Foreign Office (Auswärtiges Amt – AA).⁶

This gave the Germans an impulse to open a debate on the idea of using “neighbours” in the Endlösung. After 29 May 1941, further discussions on Rosenberg’s guidelines must indeed have been held in National Socialist structures (RSHA,

⁵ Apart from Mayer, another trusted employee of APA NSDAP came to form part of RMfdbO – Georg Leibbrandt, from July 1941 Chief of the Political Division (Hauptabteilung I – Politik), see: Bundesarchiv Koblenz (BAK), N 1719 (*Nachlass Werner Koeppen: “Gedanken zur Ostpolitik Alfred Rosenbergs”*), fol. 7; A. Rosenberg, *Dzienniki 1934–1944*, ed. J. Matthäus, F. Bajohr (Warszawa, 2016), pp. 61, 352 [entry from 1 May 1941]; pp. 565–67 [Document 7, fragments of four instructions of Dienststelle Rosenberg concerning propaganda and press communication on the Soviet Union]; and H.-J. Priamus, *Meyer: Zwischen Kaiserstreue und NS-Täterschaft. Biographische Konturen eines deutschen Bürgers* (Essen, 2011), pp. 341–57.

⁶ The AA representative at the ProMi Department East and ‘Vineta’ was Kurt Georg Kiesinger (also Leiter der Rundfunkpolitischen Abteilung in AA), later the Chancellor of Germany (1966–69), see: W.H. Krause, *Vineta: Die geheimste Dienststelle des Dritten Reiches* (Leisnig, 2017); Н. Мюллер, *Вермахт и оккупация (1941–1944)* (Москва, 1974); Д. Жуков, *Власовцы и нацистская пропаганда* (Москва, 2000), p. 30 [обзор деятельности отдела работ д-ра Тауберта (антибольшевизм) рейхсминистериума пропаганды до 31.12.1944]; Д. Жуков, И. Ковтун, *Антисемитская пропаганда на оккупированных территориях РСФСР (Москва–Ростов-на-Дону, 2015)*, pp. 67–70; and D.E. Zimmer, ‘What Happened to Sergey Nabokov?’, <http://www.d-e-zimmer.de/PDF/SergeyN.pdf> (accessed: 4 Jan. 2024).

SS, APA NSDAP, AA, ProMi, OKH, FHO, and Abwehr) – and yet to this day, no documents or stenographic records referring to Rosenberg’s ideas have been discovered. Therefore, we may only assume that the document of 29 May 1941 – found in the Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts – is not the sole record bearing evidence of the deliberations of German officials on the plan of placing complete or at least partial responsibility for the murder of Jews in the East on their “neighbours”. This fact alone reveals how little knowledge we have about archival patrimony, which has not been subject to any comprehensive research for the last twenty years. Still, the ideas of APA NSDAP were turned into horrific reality by SS-Obergruppenführer Reinhard Heydrich. Head of the Reich Security Main Office (Leiter des Reichssicherheitshauptamt – RSHA), he was responsible for practically implementing the concept of *Selbstreinigungskaktionen*. As the leader of RSHA, Heydrich gave orders to subordinate Einsatzgruppen: A, B, C, and D, operating in the territory of the Soviet Union. He was the author of the verbal order of 17 June 1941, given at the briefing for EG and EK commanders in Berlin and repeated the same day in Pretzsch an der Elbe.

This former Saxon town on the Elbe was a training site for officers and functionaries of EG and EK in Grenzpolizeischule Pretzsch an der Elbe.⁷ After the war, a testimony on the preparations for genocide was given by SS-Standartenführer und Ministerialrat Walter Blume, a subordinate of SS-Brigadeführer Bruno Streckenbach and head of Personalabteilung (Leiter der Gruppe I A) in Amt I RSHA:

When I received the instruction in Berlin to go to Pret[z]sch, I did not know the purpose of the task assigned to me. Having arrived in Pret[z]sch, I met with several officers of roughly the same rank as me; physicians and officers had been in Pret[z]sch and Düben for a couple of weeks, and I launched military training. They were organised into companies. The conclusion I drew was that we were to assist the Sicherheitspolizei during military operations. Certain targets were named in conversations, referring to England and Russia [Great Britain and the Soviet Union]. Several days before the Russian campaign [the war

⁷ Grenzpolizeischule Pretzsch an der Elbe was located at the Pretzsch castle and operated from 1937 as a training centre for border control and sentry functionaries subordinate to the SS. The units of SS-Grenz- und Wacheinheiten consisted of auxiliary border employees (Hilfsgrenzangestellten – Higa) in customs administration (Zollverwaltung) and Bavarian SS border control (bayrischen SS-Grenzüberwachung – SSG). In May and June 1941, Grenzpolizeischule Pretzsch/Elbe became a concentration site for delegated soldiers and policemen who were to form *Einsatzgruppen* and *Einsatzkommandos* and carry out extermination actions in the USSR-occupied territories. The participants of the training course came from Reichssicherheitshauptamt (RSHA), in particular from Sicherheitsdienst (SD), Ordnungspolizei, and Waffen-SS. Some were lodged in the neighbouring towns of Düben and Bad Schmiedeberg. It was where SS-Ogruf. Reinhard Heydrich gave a speech indicating the goals and tasks of EG/EK, which boiled down to murdering communists and the “Jewish intelligentsia” of the Soviet Union with the use of the mechanism of *Selbstreinigungskaktionen*, see: J. Banach, ‘Die Rolle der Schulen der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD’, in: *Fürstenberg-Drögen: Schichten eines verlassenenen Ortes*, ed. F. von Buttlar (Berlin, 1994), pp. 88–96.

with the USSR], SS-Obergruppenführer [[in fact SS-Brigadeführer und Generalmajor der Polizei Bruno] Streckenbach of Amt I RSHA unexpectedly came to Pret[z]sch and told the gathered officers – most of them later became the first commanders of *Einsatzgruppen* and *Einsatz-* and *Sonderkommandos* – that we were planning to attack Russia [the USSR], announced the intentions of the tasks assigned to the Sicherheitspolizei, and in particular the division which resulted in the creation of *Einsatzgruppen* and [*Einsatz*]kommandos, and explained our relationship to the army. During his speech, he also read to us the Decree of the Führer, according to which Eastern Jews from Soviet Russia were to be exterminated in the course of the Russian campaign. The people gathered at the site had no idea about the decree. Then a reaction came. Those of the same rank, like Streckenbach, spoke loudly, while the others, breaking the usual strict discipline, were very anxious and made the following comments: how do we do this? This is impossible and impossible to carry out [sic!]. Streckenbach replied to these comments, saying he understood our disapproving reaction, but nothing could be done as it was the Führer’s Decree and needed to be followed. For the Führer’s Decree, he gave the following reasons: firstly, the need to secure the conquered territory against partisan activity, which was to be expected since it should be assumed that Eastern Jews [Ostjuden] are natural supporters of the partisans, and secondly, that Eastern Jews were intellectual advocates of World Bolshevism and [their] total destruction was necessary to defeat Soviet Russia. Finally, Streckenbach pointed out the fact that our activities in *Einsatzgruppen* were governed by military law and ordered us to instruct the members of our [*Einsatz*]kommandos that each of them was bound by military law with all its consequences in case he did not follow orders; court martials or SS and Polizei courts will be used, and death sentences will potentially be given.⁸

Further confirmation came in the form of subsequent written documents: *Fernschreiben vom 29.6.1941* to EG commanders, *Einsatzbefehl vom 1.7.1941* and *Einweisung vom 2.7.1941*. The first of the three, a teleprinter message of 29 June, included clear guidelines: “With reference to my previous oral instruction given on 17 June in Berlin, I remind you of the following: 1. No obstacles should be imposed on the attempts to self-cleanse emerging in the anti-communist and anti-Jewish milieus of newly seized territories. To the contrary, they should be instigated without leaving a trace and stoked up if necessary, as well as steered in the appropriate direction, but this should be done in a way that prevents local ‘self-defence circles’ from later invoking certain ordinances or political promises given to them”.⁹ Similar instructions were delivered in the *Einsatzbefehl Nr. 2* operation order of 1 July 1941. Naturally, this did not impede the execution of purely German actions, such as the one carried out on 27 June 1941 in Białystok by subunits of

⁸ Archiwum Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej (Archives of the Institute of National Remembrance) (hereinafter: AIPN), BU 2535/973, n.p. (*Nürnberg Prozess IX – Walter Blume*).

⁹ *Deutsche Besatzungsherrschaft in der UdSSR 1941–45: Dokumente der Einsatzgruppen in der Sowjetunion*, ed. K.-M. Mallmann, A. Angrick, and J. Matthäus, vol 2 (Darmstadt, 2013), pp. 35–37 (Fernschreiben Chef der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD vom 29. 6. 1941: Einsatzbefehl Nr.1); *Die Einsatzgruppen in der besetzten Sowjetunion 1941/42. Die Tätigkeits- und Lageberichte des Chefs der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD*, ed. P. Klein (Berlin, 1997), p. 319.

the “Silesian” 221st Security Division (“schlesische” 221. Sicherungsdivision), in particular the Polizei-Bataillon 309. and the 1st Company of the Pionier-Bataillon 635.¹⁰ It is often claimed that German orders or incitement on the part of EG functionaries were not necessary, but such statements are disproven by the content of a report authored by SS-Brigadeführer und Generalmajor der Polizei Walther Stahlecker. The commander of EG A and later Chief of the Security Police in Ostland (Befehlshaber der Einsatzgruppe A – Befehlshaber der Sicherheitspolizei – Sipo – und des Sicherheitsdienst des Reichsführers SS – SD – Ostland) wrote the following on 15 October 1941:

Already in the first hours after the entry of troops, albeit with much difficulty, the local antisemitic forces were persuaded to perpetrate a pogrom against Jews. [...] On the outside, it was necessary to show that the local population spontaneously took the first steps in the natural reaction against the decades-long oppression by the Jews and the communist terror of the past era. [...] Nevertheless, it was crucial to fabricate certain facts which would be indisputable and demonstrable in the future, showing that the liberated people themselves took the most drastic measures against the Bolshevik and Jewish enemies and that the instructions given by the German side would be blurred. [...] The obligation of the Sicherheitspolizei was to initiate those self-cleansing efforts and funnel them in an appropriate direction so that the goal of cleansing the territory would be achieved as quickly as possible.¹¹

It is important to note that the ethnically diverse population in the “Bloodlands” had lived for centuries without showing any signs of thirst for blood based on political or religious instigation. Only the end of the nineteenth century, particularly the era of ideological empires, fostered and spurred the murderous instincts of the peoples of Central and Eastern Europe. Naturally, there had earlier been instances of more or less heated conflicts between neighbours on religious or cultural grounds.

¹⁰ W. Curilla, *Die deutsche Ordnungspolizei und der Holocaust im Baltikum und in Weissrussland 1941–1944* (Paderborn–München–Wien–Zürich, 2005), p. 89; Ch. Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde: Die deutsche Wirtschafts- und Vernichtungspolitik in Weissrussland 1941–1944* (Hamburg, 1999), pp. 542–43 (on the massacre in Bialystok); *Deutsche Besatzungsherrschaft in der UdSSR*, pp. 41–43 (*Fernschreiben Chef der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD vom 1. 7. 1941: Einsatzbefehl Nr. 2*) and 44–48 (*Rundschreiben Chef der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD an die Höheren SS- und Polizeiführer im Osten vom 2.7.1941*); A.B. Rossino, ‘Polish “Neighbours” and German Invaders: Contextualizing Anti-Jewish Violence in the Bialystok District during the Opening Weeks of Operation Barbarossa’, *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry*, vol. 16: *Focusing on Jewish Popular Culture and Its Afterlife* (2003), 431–52.

¹¹ *Trial of the Major War Criminals before the International Military Tribunal Nuremberg 14 November 1945 – 1 October 1946*, vol. 37 (Nuremberg, 1949), pp. 672 and 682 [Report by SS-Brigadeführer Stahlecker, Chief of the Einsatzgruppe A, concerning the activities of the group on the northern Russian [East/Soviet] front and in the occupied territories of the Baltic states up to October 1941: co-operation with the Wehrmacht; incitement of the population to pogroms against the Jews; mass executions of Jews and communists (giving figures); systematic massacre of insane persons; harsh deterrent measures in the fight against partisans another matters].

However, they never escalated to the level of the cruel pogroms of the nineteenth century or the *Selbstreinigungsaktionen* during the Second World War. Only the authoritarian Tsarist regime and the National Socialist dictatorship were able to undermine this harmonious coexistence.

Implementation

The scope of *Selbstreinigungsaktionen* covered almost the entire rear area of Ostheer and troops allied with the German Reich fighting on the Eastern Front – from Riga to Odesa and from Jedwabne to Rostov-on-Don and even Mineralnye Vody (Минеральные Воды). The “self-cleansing” operations lasted from June 1941 until August 1942, which shows that the scale of the murders cannot be limited to just the events in the Podlasie/Podlachia/Podlachien region and the most commonly known incidents in Wąsosz (5 July), Radziłów (7 July), and Jedwabne (10 July).

In May and June 1941, soldiers and policemen assigned to EK and EG were assembled at the Border Police School in Pretzsch on the Elbe (Grenzpolizeischule Pretzsch an der Elbe). The units were preparing for deployment and operations in the East. The participants of the month-long training course originated from RSHA, including Sipo, SD, Ordnungspolizei (Orpo), and Waffen-SS (whose divisions were additionally instructed to support the activities of EK and EG).¹²

“Dealing with Jews” was at times voluntary and spontaneous. Such incidents may have been prompted by instructions given by the pro-German and German-financed

¹² Examples of crimes committed by soldiers of the SS-Infanterie Division (mot.) “Wiking”, including Finnish volunteers, which took place in the first half of July 1941: Lvov (1 July 1941): The Baptism of SS-Wiking war crimes alongside the Einsatzgruppe C – Dutch, Norwegian, Finnish SS-volunteers during Lemberger *Selbstreinigungsaktion*; Krzywicze/Krivichi (2 July 1941): The annihilation of a local community; Slowita (2 July 1941): Fire-raising, wild shootings, and execution; Kurowice (3 July 1941): 180 Soviet POWs were shot and some Jews; Złoczów/Zolochiv (3–4 July 1941). The atrocities in the recollections of the locals; Zborów/Zboriv (4 July 1941): Further Massacre of Jews: Ozerne (3–5 July 1941): 180–200 Jews killed, and two synagogues burned; Nowiki/Noviki (3–4 July 1941). Minor scuffles and the killing of stragglers; Urycz/Urych (7 July 1941): at least 300 civilians were shot; Tarnopol/Tarnopil (4–5 July 1941): An urban massacre by *Sonderkommando 4b*, Dutch & Finnish SS-volunteers possible gauntlet of the SS-Wiking’s Schlachtereier (Butcher) Kompanie; Mikulińce/Mykulyntsi (5 July 1941): the war crimes of the SS-Wiking units and Steiner is claimed to have ordered the execution of 200 Soviet POWs; Grzymałów/Hrymailiv (5 July 1941): swift settlement with Jews in passing; Chorostków/Khorostkiv (5 July 1941): outrages against the Jews; Husiatyn (6 July 1941): the mowing down of civilians and Soviet POWs; Płoskirów/Proskuriv/Khmelnytskyi (11 July 1941): mopping-up actions in the streets, see: K. Struve, *Deutsche Herrschaft, ukrainischer Nationalismus, antijüdische Gewalt: Der Sommer 1941 in der Westukraine* (Berlin–Boston, 2015), pp. 127–29; and L. Westerland, *The Finnish SS-volunteers and Atrocities against Jews, Civilians and Prisoners of War in Ukraine and the Caucasus Region 1941–1943. An Archival Survey* (Helsinki, 2019), pp. 98–158.

Lithuanian Activist Front (Lietuviu Aktyvistu Frontas – LAF) and Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (Організація Українських Націоналістів – ОУН/OUN). Interestingly, there is a striking similarity between the documents and proclamations of LAF and OUN and the orders received by the commanders of German Einsatzgruppen or Abwehr.¹³

The language of the proclamations and instructions of LAF and OUN influenced the developments in the streets of Kovno/Kauen/Kaunas and Lvov/Lemberg/Lviv even before the entry of the German EG A and EG C units. Naturally, nobody denies the involvement of *Sonderkommando 1b* under the command of SS-Obersturmbannführer Erich Ehrlinger and *Einsatzkommando 3* commanded by SS-Standartenführer Karl Jäger in Kovno/Kauen/Kaunas. The case was similar in Lvov/Lemberg/Lviv, where the *Selbstreinigungsaktion* was assisted by *Sonderkommando 4b* commanded by SS-Obersturmbannführer Günther Herrmann. It is also important to remember the complicity of the “Bavarian-Swabian” 1st Gebirgs-Division under the command of Generalleutnant Hubert Lanz – its soldiers not only documented the genocidal *Selbstreinigungsaktion* in Lvov/Lemberg/Lviv but also directly participated in its war crime.¹⁴

There is still no academic monograph that would fully reconstruct the first stage of the Endlösung, which played out in the region of Podlasie/Podlachia/Podlachien in the summer of 1941. We know that among the participants of these genocidal actions were the Polizei-Bataillonen 309., 316. and 322., the EK mentioned above and EG, Wehrmacht (with 221st Sicherungsdivision and rear units of the infantry division), Waffen-SS, as well as the local population. The events which unravelled in Wąsosz, Radziłów, and Jedwabne may be traced to one of the units of EG B – possibly *Einsatzkommando 8* under SS-Sturmbannführer Otto Bradfisch or *Kommando Bialystok* under SS-Hauptsturmführer Wolfgang Birkner of KdS Warschau. Birkner’s unit departed from Warsaw on 2 July 1941. Other potential culprits are subunits of East Prussian Sipò: the *Kommandos*

¹³ T. Szarota, *U progu Zagłady. Zajścia antyżydowskie i pogromy w okupowanej Europie* (Warszawa, 2000), pp. 207–17; and id., “Selbstreinigungsaktionen” Sipò i SD’, p. 687.

¹⁴ The German mountain infantry (Gebirgsjägers) later came to be responsible for murdering thousands of civilians during anti-partisan operations in occupied Yugoslavia, Albania, and Greece in 1943–44, executing hostages, massacres on Italian soldiers and officers on Cephalonia after Italy had withdrawn from the war, and assisting in the deportations of Jews from north-western Greece to KZ Auschwitz, where they were exterminated, see: Ch.R. Browning and J. Matthäus, *The Origins of the Final Solution: The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy, September 1939–March 1942* (Lincoln, 2007), pp. 226–27; Ch. Gerlach, *The Extermination of the European Jews. New Approaches to European History* (Cambridge, 2016), pp. 6–7; J. Banach, ‘Die Rolle der Schulen der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD’, in: *Fürstenberg-Drögen: Schichten eines verlassenen Ortes*, ed. F. von Buttlar (Berlin, 1994), pp. 88–96; R. Croucher, ‘How Has Post-Soviet Lithuania Used Holocaust Remembrance to Project a “New” European Identity?’, 16 Nov. 2013, <http://defendinghistory.com/how-has-post-soviet-lithuania-used-holocaust-remembrance-to-project-a-new-european-identity/60898> (accessed: 17 Jan. 2017).

commanded by SS-Obersturmführer Hermann Schaper of Staatspolizeistelle Zichenau-Schröttersburg (Ciechanów-Płock) and SS-Sturmbannführer Wilhelm Altenloh of Staatspolizeistelle Allenstein (Olsztyn), which as early as June came to form the Bialystok Aussenstelle der Staatspostelle Allenstein.

It was just the beginning of *Selbstreinigungsaktionen* supporting the German executions of Jews by shooting, characteristic of the first subsequent phase of the Shoah. Let us look at the three most thoroughly recorded “self-cleansing actions”. The *Selbstreinigungsaktion* in Kovno/Kauen/Kaunas began on 25 June and stretched over many hours, taking place in the Vilijampolė (Slabotkė) district of the town. The area covering 1.7 hectares was inhabited by 32,000 people. The district was the heart of the Jewish community in Kovno until 1941 when the Germans converted it into a ghetto. The *Selbstreinigungsaktionen* was instigated by SS-Brigadeführer Stahlecker and carried out by the subordinates of the leader of Lithuanian partisans, Algirdas Klimaitis. A total of c. 800 Jews were killed. The death toll should also include the victims of mass killings perpetrated two days later in the courtyard of the “Liekutis” garage, better known from photos taken by Germans and accounts from Wehrmacht soldiers. It should be emphasised that the first *Selbstreinigungsaktionen* in Lithuania took place in a period when the country was ruled by the Provisional Government set up by the Lithuanians themselves. Kovno was initially governed by the military commandant of the city, Colonel Jurgis Bobelis, and Mayor Kazys Palčiauskas. Alongside these two incidents, we should also name the execution of almost 3,000 Jews on 30 June, 4 and 6 July by Lithuanian volunteers from the 3rd Company of the Tautinio Darbo Apsaugos Batalionas (TDA), commanded by Lieutenant Bronius Norkus but also subordinate to the Rollkommando Hamann led by SS-Obersturmführer Joachim Hamann. Another participant in the action was the Lithuanian Red Cross – during the wave of *Selbstreinigungsaktionen* in the summer of 1941, it distributed flyers reading: “We do not give aid to Jews”. The Lithuanians remained collaborators of Germany until 1944, and the Lithuanian Schutzmannschaften battalions participated in subsequent massacres perpetrated during Shoah and “Bandenbekämpfung” in the territories occupied by the German Reich.

The local population of occupied Lithuania may have murdered more Jews in the massacres which took place in June and July 1941 than the 8,000 killed by the German Einsatzgruppe A. In the first weeks of Operation Barbarossa, dozens of thousands of Jews fell victim to *Selbstreinigungsaktionen* perpetrated by Belarusians, Latvians, Poles, Russians, Romanians, and Ukrainians (in vast majority provoked by Germans). The Romanian army and gendarmerie killed dozens of thousands of people, most of them Jews.¹⁵

Until today, it has been practically impossible to fully uncover the cause and course of *Selbstreinigungsaktionen* in the Podlasie/Podlachia/Podlachien region. Most

¹⁵ Gerlach, *The Extermination*, p. 69.

importantly, we are yet to identify the German *Kommandos* which inspired and steered the most infamous “self-cleansing actions” at Wizna (end of June), Wąsosz (5 July), Radziłów (7 July), Jedwabne (10 July), Łomża (early August), Tykocin (22–25 August), Rutki (4 September), Piątница Poduchowna, and Zambrów. To this day, the combat trail has not been fully reconstructed, not to mention finding any war diaries (*Kriegstagebuch*) kept by each extermination unit. Every individual subunit was obliged to record the campaign’s course, headcount, combat losses, damages inflicted on the enemy, etc. The suspected instigator of these massacres was SS-Obersturmführer Schaper, recognised by two Jewish witnesses, survivors of the *Selbstreinigungsaktionen* in Tykocin and Radziłów. Their accounts led Dmitrów to conclude: “Schaper – I assume he was in charge here [in Podlasie] – play the role of a *sui generis* precursor to the Holocaust”. However, other potential initiators of the genocide are the aforementioned SS-Hauptsturmführer Birkner and the subordinates of SS-Sturmbannführer Altenloh, who soon became a crucial figure in Białystok. It should be emphasized here that there have been no antisemitic activities of the Polish population since the Germans entered Podlasie/Podlachia/Podlachien in the first days of Fall Barbarossa. For example, when Jedwabne was occupied by the Germans on 23 or 24 June, the Germans set up a post *Gendarmerie* there. The post was manned by eight to eleven German gendarmes. The eyewitness Szmul Wasersztejn reported that part of local Poles prepared to start antisemitic activities in Jedwabne on 25 June. This was stopped after an intervention by the priest. Gendarmes drove the six abused people, who were said to have been communists, out of the city and shot them. *Selbstreinigungsaktionen* occurred when the *Teilkommandos* mentioned above appeared, which inspired or even forced (with rifles pointed) the “neighbours” to exterminate their Jewish co-inhabitants. No historian or other scientist has yet explained the reasons for this two-week “calm before the storm (doom)”.¹⁶

In the first weeks of July, the front was rapidly moving east, and advancing with it was Einsatzgruppe B – reaching Minsk and heading towards Smolensk. As a result, no *Einsatzkommandos* or *Sonderkommandos* tasked with carrying out “cleanses”

¹⁶ A. Bubnys, *Lietuvių policijos batalionai, 1941–1945 m.* (Vilnius, 2017); W. Curilla, *Der Judenmord in Polen und die deutsche Ordnungspolizei 1939–1945* (Paderborn–München–Wien–Zürich, 2011), p. 301; Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde*, pp. 536–37; id., *The Extermination*, p. 339; *The Good Old Days: The Holocaust as Seen by Its Perpetrators and Bystanders*, ed. E. Klee, W. Dressen, and V. Riess (New York, 1991), pp. 24–38; K. Stoll, *Die Herstellung der Wahrheit: Strafverfahren gegen ehemalige Angehörige der Sicherheitspolizei fuer den Bezirk Białystok* (Berlin–Boston, 2011), pp. 304–05; П. Станкерас, *Литовские полицейские батальоны. 1941–1945 гг.* (Москва, 2009), pp. 10–20 and 44–50 [sic! – not a single mention of the *Selbstreinigungsaktion* in Kovno, although it is Stankeras’s abridged version of the Lithuanian original]; Szarota, *U progu Zagłady*, pp. 199–274; and E. Dmitrów, ‘Oddziały operacyjne niemieckiej Policji Bezpieczeństwa i Służby Bezpieczeństwa a początek zagłady Żydów w Łomżyńskim i na Białostocczyźnie latem 1941 roku’, in: *Wokół Jedwabnego*, ed. P. Machcewicz and K. Persak, vol. 1: *Studia* (Warszawa, 2002), pp. 327–47, esp. p. 346.

in Podlasie/Podlachia/Podlachien were present in the Białystok and Łomża region. To fill this operational gap, at the turn of July 1941, RSHA instructed IdS Nordost (Königsberg) and BdS Ost to form support units (*Unterstützungskommandos*), also called special task operational units (*Einsatzkommandos zu besonderer Verwendung*). BdS Ost formed four subunits, the size of a platoon each, comprising 112 SS and Sipo officers, NCO's and privates in total. *Teilkommandos* left Warsaw for Białystok on 3 July 1941 to launch *Selbstreinigungsaktionen* in Podlasie/Podlachia/Podlachien. Similar subunits were formed by *IdS Nordost Staatspolizeistelle Tilsit*, *Staatspolizeistelle Frankenstein*, *Staatspolizeistelle Allenstein*, and *Staatspolizeistelle Zichenau/Schröttersburg* in East Prussia.¹⁷

The outbreak of the German-Soviet war met with a positive reaction from the Polish population (as well as all other nations incorporated into the USSR in 1939–40). The residents were often willing to collaborate with the entering Wehrmacht troops, often welcoming them with flowers and food. They also identified collaborators of the Soviet authorities, whom the Germans then shot immediately together with the “commissaries”. Personal scores started to be settled as early as the last days of June 1941, with the victims usually being Jews. The initial chaos preceding the installation of the German occupation regime brought with it various criminal acts: theft, homicide with robbery, plunder, rape, etc. Without representatives of local occupation authorities, the population felt that breaking the law would go unpunished or even be condoned. Concomitantly, the participants of the *Selbstreinigungsaktionen* would try to frame the tragedy of the local Jewish communities as a retaliation for the Soviet period. The massacre in Jedwabne was instigated on 10 July 1941 by the Germans, who informed the local residents of the planned mass murder of the Jewish community. Peasants would flock to the town from surrounding localities in wagons. Some inhabitants of Jedwabne and its environs started to rush their Jewish neighbours out of their homes and herd them to the marketplace. It followed the same course of events as the massacre at Radziłów, which the witnesses independently mentioned, Jewish and Polish alike.

“It happened on 7 July 1941. At about 9 am, three cars arrived with Gestapo officers, who ordered the residents of the town [Radziłów] to do with the Jews whatever they saw fit”, Berek Wasersztejn recalled. This aspect was discussed in more detail by Henryk Dziekoński, who collaborated with the Germans during the *Selbstreinigungsaktionen*:

When the Germans entered our territory in 1941, in the month of June me and my colleagues tasked with keeping order in the town of Radziłów received an order from the Gestapo [Sipo/EK officers] to herd the Jews living at Radziłów to the marketplace and to

¹⁷ J. Bańbor, ‘Zwyczajna twarz aparatu zbrodni – sprawozdanie z działalności szefa Einsatzgruppe “B” za okres od 23.06. do 13.06. 1941 r.’, *Tygodnik Głos*, no. 23/881, 9 June 2001, p. 12; Dmitrów, ‘Oddziały operacyjne’, pp. 284–92; Th. Urban, ‘Gesucht Hermann Schaper’, *Sddeutsche Zeitung*, 1 Sep. 2001; id., ‘Poszukiwany Hermann Schaper’, *Rzeczpospolita*, 1 Sep. 2001.

torture them. We readily and happily accepted the order of the Gestapo [*Teilkommando/Einsatzkommando/Sonderkommando*]. [...] When giving us the order, the Gestapo officer [Sipo/EK officer] appointed me as commander and told me that we were allowed to stab the Jews with knives and hack at them with axes. When one member of our group who was also participating in the massacre of Jews pointed out that blood would be spilt on both sides, one of the Gestapo officers [Sipo officer] said: You have a barn, you can burn them all.¹⁸

The instigators and participants in anti-Jewish actions were not exclusively people from the social margins, as evidenced by the events at Radziłów and Jedwabne. According to the German schemes, the local population organised groups serving as enforcement service/people's guard/auxiliary police/(*Ordnungsdienst – OD/Hilfspolizei – Hipo/Volkswehr/Schutzmannschaften – Schuma*). Accepted by the Germans as temporary structures, they were a substitution for the local elites in the transitory period, as the latter were depleted mainly following mass arrests and deportation deep into the USSR. This may have been the case with the burning of Jews in Jedwabne, although the temporary town mayor was Marian Karolak, who had previous experience working in the pre-war local government. The residents of Radziłów were represented by the parish priest, barber-surgeon, and municipality secretary. Most members of OD were volunteers from the anti-Soviet underground movement who joined the forces to protect order, although it soon transpired that they were taking an active part in delivering “justice”.

The *Teilkommandos* played an important role in the core stage of *Selbstreinigungssaktionen* at Radziłów and other localities in the Podlasie region. German members oversaw the process of gathering local Jews in marketplaces, encouraged the local volunteers to participate in torturing and humiliating the Jewish victims, and finally made sure that local volunteers took them to the place of execution. Locals volunteering to help in the genocide were other locals acting under duress or remaining passive. The violence against Jewish neighbours had various roots: coercion by the German *Kommandos* officers, goads from the Polish “executors”, antisemitism, rashness, the lowest instincts, and impunity for looting.

In Jedwabne, a group of 40–50 Jewish men, including the rabbi, was humiliated according to the well-tested German standard earlier implemented; for example, in Vienna in 1938 – forcing Jews to clean public spaces: weeding the grass from street pavements and the marketplace. They were then ordered to knock down the statue of Lenin standing in the town and drag it to a barn. There, the Poles murdered the Jews and threw their bodies, together with the shattered statue, into a previously prepared pit. The Poles then led another group of local Jews to the wooden barn with a thatched roof. Locked inside, the victims were burnt alive. In

¹⁸ *Wokół Jedwabnego*, ed. P. Machcewicz and K. Persak, vol. 2: *Dokumenty* (Warszawa, 2002, p. 877) [Protokół przesłuchania świadka Berka Wasersztajna przez oficera śledczego WUBP w Białymstoku Feliksa Walaszczyka; 27 November 1945] and 886 [Protokół przesłuchania podejrzanego Henryka Dziekońskiego przez oficera śledczego PUBP w Grajewie Konstantego Białobokiego, 11 Aug. 1947].

some accounts and testimonies, the witnesses mentioned that the Germans had been taking photos and filming the entire “self-cleansing action”. The murder committed by the Polish residents of Jedwabne and surrounding localities was instigated by the Germans – Sipo officers from a hitherto unidentified *Kommandos* subordinate to or independent from EG B – who condoned the initiation of a *Selbstreinigungsaktion* by the “neighbours”.¹⁹

The events in Jedwabne were not an isolated case, as in late June and early July 1941, the Germans were able to incite “self-cleansing actions” on a smaller or larger scale in at least 22 localities of the Białystok and Łomża region. Thousands of Jews fell victim to the antisemitic *Selbstreinigungsaktionen*. In several localities, the Poles killed hundreds of Jewish people, for example, at Jedwabne, Kolno, Radziłów, Szczuczyn, or Wąsosz, although in most cases, the number of casualties amounted to several dozen, for example, in Goniądz and Jasionówka. In other places, for instance, in Korycin and Kleszczele, the Germans gave the part of Polish residents free rein to plunder and harass their Jewish neighbours. Podlasie/Podlachia/Podlachien and the northeastern provinces of the Second Polish Republic (annexed and incorporated into the Byelorussian Socialist Soviet Republic) were not unique in terms of the occurrence of “self-cleansing actions”. In the summer of 1941, a wave of anti-Jewish *Selbstreinigungsaktionen* swept hundreds of towns and thousands of villages in the territories of Eastern Europe invaded by the German troops and their allies – Romanian soldiers in Bessarabia or Hungarians in Podole/Podolia/Podolien. The culprits were German and Austrian soldiers of the Ostheer, Orpo policemen, and Sipo and SD officers at the helm of *Einsatzkommandos*, Romanian and Hungarian soldiers, and the local population goaded by the Germans: Belarusians, Estonians, Lithuanians, Latvians, Poles, Russians, and Ukrainians.

The operations forming part of *Selbstreinigungsaktionen* in Eastern Galicia (Eastern Lesser Poland) are still a poorly explored research area. We shall shed more light on the less publicised episodes that contributed to the “self-cleansing action” in Lvov/Lemberg/Lviv. The first anti-Jewish actions in this city were taken as part of the “prison massacres” of 24 June 1941 as a result of the panicked escape of the regional Soviet authorities. Ukrainian nationalists of the OUN were unable to take control of Lvov as “[the e]normous, miles-long columns of tanks, cars, prime movers of the 4th Mechanised Corps [the most powerful on the Southern Front, commanded by Major-General Andrey Vlasov] were thrashing around in the ‘vicious triangle’ between Nemyriv–Mostyska–Lvov as ‘fire service’ which [commander of the Soviet 6th Army, Lieutenant-General Ivan] Muzychenko wanted to use to resist the German infantry advancing towards Lvov”. The Russian author cites telling excerpts from a report by Colonel Yefim Pushkin, commander of

¹⁹ AIPN, S 1/00/Zn, Postanowienie o umorzeniu śledztwa w sprawie wzięcia udziału w dokonaniu zabójstw obywateli polskich narodowości żydowskiej, w dniu 10 lipca 1941 r. w Jedwabnem, Białystok, 30 June 2003, pp. 199–201.

the 32nd Tank Division, on the chaos in Soviet military formations of which the OUN failed to take advantage by using “Molotov cocktails”, a weapon particularly effective in the narrow alleys of the city: “Marching through the streets of Lvov, the division encountered a stream of combat and transport vehicles of the 8th Mechanised Corp coming from the opposite direction [the 8th Mechanised Corp was moving east in pursuit of German tanks, and the 32nd Tank Division was once again turning back west, towards the border – Mark Solonin]. Street battles were taking place against subversives [an armed uprising broke out in the city, and the only circumstance which saved the two Soviet tank divisions from total defeat by the Ukrainian ‘subversives’ was that the Bandera supporters/OUN members/ did not have anti-tank grenades – Panzerfausts were only created one year later – M.S.]. Having overcome the road jams with great difficulty, the division concentrated on 25 June 1941 at 2 o’clock”. At the same time, on 25–28 June, NKVD officers carried out a massacre of inmates from Lvov’s prisons: “Brygidki” in Kazimierzowska Street (now Gródecka/Horodotska Street), at Łackiego Street (now Bryullova Street), and in Zamarstynov/Samarstyniv/Zamarstyniv, murdering some 3,500–7,000 political prisoners – mostly Poles and Ukrainians. The unit covering the NKVD massacre, namely “the 4th Mechanised Corps, left Lvov on 29 June”, with its troops headed to Wielki Las/Big Forest/Velykyi Lis and Lesienicki Forest/Lysynychi Lis east of the city.²⁰

A slightly different story is told by the transcript of the report citing the archival reference number:

28 June 1941. [...] Following the order, the tank divisions took the indicated defence lines, covering the retreat of the units of the 6th Rifle Corps via Lvov [Lemberg/Lviv] towards Winniki [Wynnyky/Vynnyky]. The division moved 30 km.

29 June 1941. While moving through Lvov [Lemberg/Lviv], the division units engaged in street battles, neutralising firing points in houses and attics around the city. During the retreat from Lvov [Lemberg/Lviv], warehouses with munitions, fuel, food, and other material property were destroyed. In total, the division moved on average 35 km.

30 June 1941. The tank divisions continued to cover the retreat of some division units on the road to Złoczów [Solotschiw/Zolochiv].²¹

²⁰ In addition, the 32nd Motorised Rifle Regiment was sent to Lvov to pacify the Ukrainian irredentist rising/rebellion, which stripped the tanks of the 32nd Tank Division of organic infantry support. Even more tragicomic were the battles of the 8th Tank Division with 140 T-34 tanks and the 81st Motorised Rifle Division, which were defeated after initial battles with German infantry and mountain riflemen near Niemirów/Nemyriv, see: M. Sołonin, *23 czerwca – Dzień “M”* (Poznań, 2008), pp. 354–55, 358, and 362–63.

²¹ *Сборник боевых документов Великой Отечественной войны*, vol. 33 (Москва, 1957), [Центральный архив Министерства обороны (ЦАМО), ф. 229, оп. 3780, д. 6, л. 150–157. *Машинописная копия [Доклад командира 32-й танковой дивизии начальнику Автобронетанкового управления Юго-Западного фронта о боевых действиях дивизии за период с 22 июня по 14 июля 1941 г.]*, samsv.narod.ru/Div/Td/td032/h3.html (accessed: 24 June 2023).

Before Lvov/Lemberg/Lviv was seized by the Wehrmacht, the Ukrainian “Nachtigall” Battalion entered the city on 30 June at 4:30 am. The unit was commanded by the “Brandenburg” Oberleutnant Hans-Albrecht Herzner with Oberleutnant der Reserve Theodor Oberländer as the “political” deputy commander and his Ukrainian counterpart Oberleutnant Roman Shukhevych (future military commander of UPA). Seven hours later, the German 1st Mountain Division units under Generalleutnant Hubert Lanz (chief of staff: Oberst i.G Johann Steets) reached Lvov/Lemberg/Lviv. The same evening, at 8 pm, members of the OUN-B proclaimed the independence of Ukraine and the formation of the “government of Yaroslav Stetsko”. Announcements hung on posters around the town informed the people of Lvov of the OUN-B’s intentions of proclaiming a “Sovereign Ukrainian State” (*Українська Суверенна Держава*), while word-of-mouth propaganda forming part of the efforts to initiate a *Selbstreinigungsaktion* targeted “Lachs [Poles], Jews, and communists – enemies of the Ukrainian National Revolution” – the pamphlets distributed by the OUN openly called for the murder. On 30 June 1941, subunits of EK 4a began to launch a *Selbstreinigungsaktion* with the support of OUN pamphlets and posters distributed in the streets of Lvov. The Jews, accused *en masse* of collaborating with the communists and being complicit in the crimes of the NKVD, became the scapegoat for a part of the local population goaded by the Germans. According to Hannes Heer, the main culprits of the violence were Oberst Karl Wintergerst, City commander of Lvov/Lviv (Stadtkommandant von Lemberg) and Artillery commander (Artillerie-Kommandeur – Arko) 132, to who were subordinates of all German military units that were stationed in the city at that time. Meanwhile, a Ukrainian historian wrote in an article about the battalion “Nachtigall” that “claim about «Nachtigall» being specifically ordered to appear in the city is unsubstantiated. The three Ukrainian companies incorporated into Battle Group Heinz (Kampfgruppe Heinz) had no operational independence”. Despite the lack of documents, this kind of thesis lacks the required caution or even more detailed examination of archival sources – if not German and Ukrainian documents, then also witness accounts.

One of the reports of the Union of Armed Struggle described in detail the German *Selbstreinigungsaktion* in Lvov:

[...] Persecutions began immediately after the arrival of the Germans. They incited the Ukrainian and Polish scum to herd Jews into prisons and have them wash the corpses of the people murdered by the Bolsheviks. [...] The herded crowd was forced to run the gauntlet between people holding batons or rocks. Before the Jews made it to the corpses, they were already badly battered. The washing process was as follows: two Jewish men lifted a heavily wounded or decomposing and reeking cadaver by the head and the legs, and a Jewish woman washed it in the air, which was almost unfeasible in these conditions, and then was ordered to take the hand of the corpse and kiss it.²²

²² M. Balaban, ‘Nachtigall in the battle for Lviv Ledge. Structure, tasks, actions’, *Studia z Dziejów Rosji i Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej*, vol. 56, no. 3 (Special Issue) (2021), 85–106 (pp. 91 and

The situation in Lvov was also aptly reconstructed by Dieter Schenk:

There is no doubt that the German army [Wehrmacht, including – apart from the Mountain Division – the command of the XXXXIX Gebirgs-Armee Korps with General der Gebirgstruppe Ludwig Kübler at the helm], the [S]ecurity [P]olice [Sicherheitspolizei] and the [S]ecret [F]ield [P]olice [Geheime Feldpolizei] not only condoned those mass murders but also incited and supported them, using Ukrainians as the proactive factor, as they were called by Heydrich. It is also certain that members of the battalion [«]Nachtigall[»] also directly took part in those killings. All that was happening in plain sight of the 295th Infanterie Division [commanded by Generalleutnant Herbert Geitner, subordinate to the IV Armee Korps, commanded by General der Infanterie Viktor von Schwedler]. The massacre was only brought to a temporary halt by the protest from the general staff officer of the division [this is probably a translation of the term “Erste Generalstabsoffizier” but in fact the officer in question was Ia General Staff Officer of the 295th Infanterie Division Oberstleutnant Helmuth Groscurth, who was soon to gain renown for defending the Jewish children of the massacre in Bila Tserkva] sent on 2 July 1941 to the [staff of the] 17th [A]rmy [meaning that it was received by its chief of staff, Generalmajor Vincenz Müller, and its commander, General der Infanterie Carl-Heinrich von Stülpnagel].²³

The *Selbstreinigungsaktion* in Lvov/Lemberg/Lviv had a coda in the form of the “Petliura Days” taking place on 25–27 July 1941, instigated by the OUN-B propaganda fuelling antisemitic hatred and aggression. The Germans once again condoned mass arrests on the basis of previously prepared proscription lists, plunder, vandalism, assaults, herding Jews to the prison in Łackiego Street and their execution by extermination squads formed by the Ukrainians. The Ukrainian auxiliary police and militants murdered some 1,500–2,000 people. The second *Selbstreinigungsaktion* in Lvov was fully orchestrated by the Germans, which is demonstrated, among others, by the preserved “incriminating” photos and recordings for the film chronicle produced by the Germans during the “self-cleansing action” of 1941. It is possible that Polish residents of Lvov also participated in the massacre, although there are no surviving accounts which would speak to this. *Selbstreinigungsaktionen* against the Jewish population were carried out in 35 localities in Eastern Galicia (Eastern

103); H. Heer, ‘Einübung in den Holocaust: Lemberg Juni/Juli 1941’, *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, vol. 49, no. 5 (2001), 409–27, esp. 421; G. Motyka, R. Wnuk, ‘Żydzi w Galicji Wschodniej i na Wołyniu w latach 1939–1941’, in: *Europa nieprowincjonalna. Przemiany na ziemiach wschodnich dawnej Rzeczypospolitej (Białoruś, Litwa, Łotwa, Ukraina, wschodnie pogranicze III Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej) w latach 1772–1999 // Non-Provincial Europe. Changes on the Eastern Territories of the Former Polish Republic (Belarus, Latvia, Lithuania, Ukraine, Eastern Borderland of the III Republic) in 1772–1999*, ed. K. Jasiewicz (Warszawa–Londyn, 1999), p. 590 [Meldunek sytuacyjny ZWZ, lipiec 1941].

²³ D. Schenk, *Noc morderców. Kaźń polskich profesorów we Lwowie i holocaust w Galicji Wschodniej* (Kraków, 2011), p. 109; Ch. Streit, ‘Angehörige des militärischen Widerstands und der Genozid an den Juden im Südbereich der Ostfront’, in: *NS-Verbrechen und der militärische Widerstand gegen Hitler*, ed. G.R. Ueberschär (Darmstadt, 2000), pp. 91–92.

Lesser Poland).²⁴ An important study on *Selbstreninungsaktionen* is a book by Polish-German historian Grzegorz Rossoliński-Liebe, and this is even though it is officially a biography of Stepan Bandera. In dozens of pages, he describes both “self-cleansing actions” in Lvov, as well as genocidal anti-Jewish activity as part of the *Selbstreninungsaktionen* in the Eastern Galicia (Eastern Lesser Poland) and other Ukrainian towns beyond the Zbruch River. A work entirely devoted to the “self-cleansing actions” – although the term itself is hardly mentioned – is the published doctoral dissertation by Witold Mędykowski. Of course, the subject of “Ukrainian” *Selbstreninungsaktionen* has not been exhausted, but its detailed hinting becomes an apex for further academic work.²⁵

In the public mind, the *Selbstreinigungsaktionen* stopped at the line of the Zbruch River. In reality, as we have mentioned before, they were taking place in the entire German-occupied territory from Smolensk all the way to Rostov-on-Don (or even Mineralnye Vody). A breakthrough in research was brought by Russian historians Ivan Kovtun and Dmitry Zhukov in their book on the Russian auxiliary police. In the process of fine-tuning the *Selbstreinigungsaktionen* method, the Germans involved subunits of the Russian auxiliary police in the extermination of Jews. After entering the capital of the Belarusian SSR, Nebe ordered to have

²⁴ Archiwum Akt Nowych [Central Archives of Modern Records in Warsaw], 203/XV-8, ‘Groźba eksterminacji. Sytuacja na Wołyniu i Ziemi Czerwieńskiej. Przyczyny-skutki-wskazania’, 1943, fol. 96; 203/XV-27, ‘Sprawa żydowska’ [after 1 June 1942], fol. 1; T-175, roll 233 (Ereignismeldung der UdSSR nr 24; 16 July 1941), kl. 2721537-38; F. Friedman, *Zagłada Żydów lwowskich* (Łódź, 1945), p. 6; H. Heer, ‘Lemberg 1941: Die Instrumentalisierung der NKVD-Verbrechen für den Judenmord’, in: *Kriegsverbrechen im 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. W. Wette and G.R. Ueberschär (Darmstadt, 2001), pp. 165–77; *Історія міст і сіл Української РСР: В 26 т. Івано-Франківська область*, ed. O. Чернов (Київ, 1971), p. 68; E. Jones, *Żydzi Lwowa w okresie okupacji 1939–1945* (Łódź, 1999), pp. 52–54; H. Krausnick, H.-H. Wilhelm, *Die Truppe des Weltanschauungskrieges. Die Einsatzgruppen der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD 1938–1942* (München, 1981), pp. 162, 165–66; I. Katchanovski, ‘Współczesna polityka pamięci na Wołyniu w stosunku do OUN(b) i nazistowskich masowych mordów’, in: *OUN, UPA i Zagłada Żydów*, ed. A.A. Zięba (Kraków, 2016), pp. 387–412; G. Mazur, J. Skwara, and J. Węgiński, *Kronika 2350 dni wojny i okupacji Lwowa 1 IX 1939 – 5 II 1946* (Katowice, 2007), pp. 218–19; G. Motyka, *Ukraińska partyzantka 1942–1960* (Warszawa, 2014), pp. 95–98; D. Pohl, *Nationalsozialistische Judenverfolgung in Ostgalizien 1941–1944: Organisation und Durchführung eines staatlichen Massenverbrechens* (München–Wien, 1997), pp. 54–65, 67–71, 110; Th. Sandkühler, ‘“Endlösung” in Galizien. Der Judenmord und die Rettungsinitiativen von Berthold Beitz 1941–1944 (Bonn, 1996), pp. 114–22; R. Torzecki, ‘Wspomnienia z okupowanego Lwowa’, *Dzieje Najnowsze*, vol. 19, no. 3 (1987), 141–54 (p. 142); *Українське державотворення. Акт 30 червня 1941 р. Збірник документів і матеріалів*, ed. Я. Дашкевич, В. Кук (Львів, 2002), p. 324; A. Żbikowski, ‘Lokalne pogromy Żydów w czerwcu i lipcu 1941 r. na wschodnich rubieżach II Rzeczypospolitej’, *Biuletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego*, no. 2/3 (162/163) (1992), 3–18.

²⁵ W. Mędykowski, *W cieniu gigantów. Pogromy Żydów w 1941 roku w byłej sowieckiej strefie okupacyjnej. Kontekst historyczny, społeczny i kulturowy* (Warszawa, 2015); G. Rossoliński-Liebe, *Stepan Bandera. The Life and Afterlife of a Ukrainian Nationalist: Fascism, Genocide, and Cult* (Stuttgart, 2014), pp. 195–237; id., *Stepan Bandera. Faszyzm, ludobójstwo, kult. Życie i mit ukraińskiego nacjonalisty* (Warszawa, 2018); id., *Жизнь Степана Бандеры* (Київ, 2021).

Minsk be permeated with “an atmosphere of a pogrom (*Pogromstimmung*) [...] which would find an outlet in the form of certain actions against Jews”.

According to available data, on the eve of the war, the Smolensk Oblast was inhabited by 63,000 Jews. There were several areas in which the Jewish population was concentrated. These included the following districts: Khislavichsky (3,500 people), Shumyachsky (3,000), Monastyrshchinsky (3,600), Roslavlsky (6,000), Vyazemsky (3,100), Velizhsky (2,700). The largest Jewish community – over 30,000 people – lived in Smolensk and its environs. We must also add the numerous families evacuated from Belarus and staying in the Smolensk area. At first, Jews were registered, banned from movement, and forced to wear badges with a yellow star. Later, as part of the “final solution” to the Jewish question, the occupiers started to establish ghettos and then systematically exterminate the Jewish population – modern Russian historiographic sources refrain from any discussion of *Selbstreinigungsaktionen*. Works on setting up the ghetto in Smolensk began in August 1941, a mere week after the Germans captured the city, with its primary goal being to improve the efficiency of Jewish genocide. The superintendent of the local Ordnungsdienst, Isayenkov, together with his subordinates Dudin, Shendelyev, Nikolai Chekhirkin, and Victor Sysoyev, participated in the shooting of 1,008 Jews in Monastyrshchina (Монастырщина), the first in a series of several mass executions.²⁶

The German command was usually closely obeyed, but an exception to this rule was the *Selbstreinigungsaktion* in Rostov-on-Don. The Germans managed to shoot as many as 1,000 Jews already during the first, shorter occupation of the town. However, one of the larger-scale *Selbstreinigungsaktionen* took place in July 1942,

²⁶ As pointed out by the editor of the memoirs of Boris Menshagin, “His [Menshagin’s] main omissions or transgressions, apart from his family, were the liquidations – police operations aimed at destroying selected groups of city residents remaining in the jurisdiction of the mayor. There were three contingents sentenced [to death] by the occupiers, which, apart from party functionaries, political commissioners, and prisoners of war, comprised mentally ill people, Roma/ Sinti, and Jews. He describes the fate of two categories of prisoners of war – Soviet captured by the Germans and Polish captured by the Soviets [the Katyn issue], but [in an] aloof [manner], as if it had not concerned him, or even as if he had been the last to find out”, *Без срока давности: преступления нацистов и их пособников против мирного населения на оккупированной территории РСФСР в годы Великой Отечественной войны. Смоленская область – Сборник архивных документов*, ed. П. Малышева, Е.М. Цунаева (Москва, 2020), pp. 42 and 119 (doc. 56: Акт Сычевской городской комиссии о массовом расстреле нацистами еврейского населения г. Сычевки в д. Савекино Сычевского района, 23 March 1943); Б. Меньшагин, *Воспоминания. Письма. Документы*, ed. П.М. Полян (Москва–Санкт-Петербург, 2019), pp. 45, 809 [the Mayor of Smolensk under occupation does not mention Isayenkov, Dudin (only in the preface to his memoirs), Shendelyev, Chekhirkin, or Sysoyev]; Д. Жуков, И. Ковтун, *Русская полиция* (Москва, 2010), pp. 176–86; ...*На перекрестках судеб: из воспоминаний бывших узников гетто и праведников народов мира*, ed. О.М. Аркадьева et al. (Минск, 2001), pp. 36–41, 105–07 [on the *Selbstreinigungsaktionen* in Minsk on 7 Nov. 1941]; И. Арад, *Уничтожение евреев СССР в годы немецкой оккупации (1941–1944). Сборник документов и материалов* (Иерусалим, 1991), p. 215; И.А. Альтман, *Холокост на территории СССР: Энциклопедия* (Москва, 2009), pp. 915–18 [Смоленск].

when the Germans and Austrians started to use toxic gases for mass extermination. A total of 22,000–26,800 Jews of Rostov were killed in mass executions accompanied by elements of *Selbstreinigungsaktion*. V. Yeremin, the Schuma.Btl. commander, took the lead in the murders. Even during the short-lived occupation of Stavropol Krai, in August 1942 the SD, assisted by the local OD, carried out executions by shooting in Budyonnovsk (Будённовск), the towns of Georgiyevsk (Георгиевск), Gofitskoye (Гофицкое), stanitsas Aleksandriiskaya (Александрийская), Borgustanskaya (Боргустанская), Goryachevodskiy (Горячеводский), and the villages of Donskoye (Донское), Alexeyevskoye (Алексеевское), and Ipatovo (Ипатово), and in September – in Mineralnye Vody (Минеральные Воды). We do not have information on the course of events before the executions, but the participation of local OD units suggests that, in all likelihood, the residents of the localities mentioned were involved in the process of assembling their Jewish neighbours with the use of elements of “self-cleansing actions” and later took over some of their less valuable properties with the consent of the executioners.²⁷

In any case, between 1943 and 1953, the Soviets arrested 12,196 people accused of collaborating with the Germans just in the Rostov Oblast alone. Most of these cases concerned VKP(b) members who had not followed the order to evacuate. Jones describes various individuals who collaborated with the Germans in Rostov-on-Don. From the point of view of the party, the worst form of collaboration was being complicit in the mass murders of the so-called “Soviet population” (in reality, this referred to Jews). However, “colluding with the enemy” also entailed staying in the occupied territory and engaging in the widespread practice of sharing accommodation with quartered German soldiers, as well as collaboration in the public administration sector. Jones pointed to cases of collaboration in house committees, which would submit lists of Jews and communists to the occupier. Cooperating with the Germans also extended to other spheres of public life: education, finances, and trade. However, not all of the accused were removed from their posts – this was due to favouritism and lack of qualified staff immediately after the recapture of Rostov-on-Don by the Soviets and after the war. German collaborators would

²⁷ *Einsatzgruppen C and D in the Invasion of the Soviet Union, 1941–1942*, ed. D. Pohl and A. Angrick (London, 1999), p. 25; A. Angrick, “‘Operation Blue’, Einsatzgruppe D, and the Genocide in the Caucasus”, in: *Beyond the Pale. The Holocaust in the North Caucasus*, ed. C. Brooks, K. Feferman (Rochester, 2020), pp. 69–94; id., ‘Dwelling at the Foot of a Volcano? Jewish Perspectives on the Holocaust in the North Caucasus’, in: *ibid.*, p. 66; I. Rebrova, ‘We Were Saved Because the Occupation Lasted Only Six Months’: (Self-)Reflection on Survival Strategies during the Holocaust in the North Caucasus’, in: *ibid.*, p. 228; Д. Жуков, И. Ковтун, *Русская полиция* (Москва, 2010), pp. 176–86; Е. Мовшович, ‘Холокост в Ростовской области: уничтожение евреев на Нижнем Дону и в Восточном Приазовье’, in: *Донский временник. Год 2002-й: краеведческий альманах* (Ростов-на-Дону, 2014), http://www.donvrem.dspl.ru/Files/article/m2/2/art.aspx?art_id=82 (accessed: 27 Dec. 2016); Ch. Winkler, ‘Rostov-on-Don 1942: A Little-Known Chapter of the Holocaust’, *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, vol. 30, no. 1 (2016), 105–30.

remain VKP(b) members, production plant workers, administrative staff, and teachers. The communists were concerned with their public image, fearing how they would be perceived if the public found out the actual number of collaborators among their ranks.²⁸

Suppression of historical debates on the Shoah under communism

Before 1989, there were few attempts to bring to light the issue of the “self-cleansing actions”. It is safe to say *Selbstreinigungsaktionen* as a form of the German Endlösung completely disappeared from public memory and historical research. Historians did not react to the accounts of Menachem Finkelsztejn submitted to the Archive of the E. Ringelblum Jewish Historical Archive and published in the *Grayevo Memorial Book*. Similarly ignored were the memories of two Jews from Jedwabne, Rivka Fogel and Wiktor Nieławicki (Avigdor Kochav), included in the publication *Jedwabne: History and Memorial Book*.²⁹ The lone voice crying in the wilderness was Szymon Datner, who wrote an article for the *JHI Bulletin* a year and a half after the antisemitic campaign of March 1968. Datner discussed the early stages of the extermination of Jews in Podlasie/Podlachia/Podlachien, including the German *Selbstreinigungsaktionen*, although he did not use that term. He described the actions carried out between June and August 1941 as “inspired by one and the same *Einsatzkommando*”. At the time, Datner was unable to identify the agents who initiated the genocidal events correctly.³⁰

Over two decades later, the issue was picked up by Danuta and Aleksander Wroniszewski in a long-form article on Jedwabne written for *Kontakty*. The authors cited the account of Szmul Wasersztajn but also managed to get a quote from Helena Ch., a survivor of the *Selbstreinigungsaktionen* who still lived in Jedwabne. Her story stood in stark contrast with the more commonly known narrative represented by Wasersztajn: “My grandfather and my mum’s two sisters

²⁸ Ch. Winkler, ‘The Holocaust on Soviet Territory – Forgotten Story? Individual and Official Memorialization of the Holocaust in Rostov-on-Don’, in: *Beyond the Pale*, p. 247 (after: J. Jones, ‘Every Family Has Its Freak’: Perceptions of Collaboration in Soviet Russia 1943–1948’, *Slavic Review*, vol. 64, no. 4 [2005], 747–70).

²⁹ Archiwum Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego im. E. Ringelbluma [Archive of the Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw], account 301/1846 [Wspomnienia Menachema Finkelsztejna]; 301/152 ([longer] relacja Szmula Wasersztejna) and 301/613 ([shorter] relacja Szmula Wasersztejna); *Grayevo Memorial Book*, ed. G. Gorin (New York, 1950); *Jedwabne Memorial Book*, ed. J.J. Baker, J.L. Baker (New York, 1980).

³⁰ The author does not mention anything about ‘self-cleansing actions’ in the English Summary included in the Bulletin issue, see: S. Datner, ‘Eksterminacja ludności żydowskiej w Okręgu Białostockim. Struktura administracyjna Okręgu Białostockiego’, *Biuletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego*, no. 60 (1966), 3–29 (esp. 22–23).

with their children and husbands were burnt in that barn. But I do not believe that the residents of Jedwabne could be that cruel. Szmul surely spoke out of pain and despair and that’s why he wasn’t objective”.³¹

First signs of interest in *Selbstreinigungsaktionen*

It was Agnieszka Arnold and her documentary films that managed to bring the public’s attention to the previously little-known episodes of the Shoah in Podlasie/Podlachia/Podlachien. The two TV documentaries by Arnold sought to give a fair account of the events of *Selbstreinigungsaktionen* and not to paint all residents of Jedwabne as murderers. In 1998, she started to document what inhabitants of Podlasie were saying about the Jews who used to live there. The first documentary to tackle this subject was *Gdzie mój starszy syn Kain* [“Where Is My Elder Son Kain”] (1999), which included around a dozen-minute-long segment on Jedwabne. It sparked the initial debate in the Polish press, at first with only a limited scope. “The film was shelved. Besides, the editing [of the subsequent movie, *Sąsiedzi* [‘Neighbours’] was not halted by the residents of Jedwabne but by the TVP [Telewizja Polska – Polish Television]. The process dragged on for two years”, Arnold reminisced. The filmmaker struggled with her subsequent project and dealt with interior censorship within the TVP (under the direction of post-communist President of the Management Board of TVP Robert Kwiatkowski). *Sąsiedzi* was reviewed by the Programme Committee twice. After editing, it was watched by Jan Tomasz Gross, who “gained an understanding of what happened”. Arnold then decided to share interview transcripts with Gross and agreed for his planned book also to be titled *Sąsiedzi*. Meanwhile, her documentary was not given a TV premiere for two years. Eventually, it was Gross’s book, which first saw the light of day, while the film by Arnold, still not broadcast, remained in the shadows – just like the person who actually discovered the truth of the *Selbstreinigungsaktion* in Jedwabne.

The subsequent events followed a course different than that anticipated by Agnieszka Arnold, who had “discovered” Jedwabne: “That debate failed to touch upon the fundamental issues. After all, I made that film because the residents of Jedwabne showed a civic, mature attitude towards their own past. They were the ones who spoke of a crime – they did so because they can tell good from evil and are conscious citizens”. Having cleared numerous hurdles, the TVP eventually broadcast the film in two parts. The intention of the director was to present intense emotions in an objective way – the film was to serve as a breakthrough induced through skilful documentary filmmaking. Arnold’s movies cannot be accused of being one-sided or relying too heavily on off-screen narration. *Sąsiedzi* is an

³¹ D. Wroniszewska, A. Wroniszewski, ‘...aby żyć’, *Kontakty. Łomżyński Tygodnik Społeczny. Pismo PZPR*, no. 27, 10 July 1988.

impressionistic collection of painstakingly documented voices of the witnesses. The “talking heads” discovered by Agnieszka Arnold – such as Henryk Adamczyk, Antonina Wyrzykowska, and Marianna and Stanisław Ramotowski – should have served as an invaluable contribution to the country-wide debate – and yet they did not. “When it [*Sąsiedzi*] was finally broadcast in April 2000, not even one review was published; it went totally under the radar. The debate on Jedwabne only erupted half a year after the publication of Gross’s work. I understand that Gross was perhaps trying to shock... But you cannot reproduce such a terrible event with the use of ‘literary’ means. Gross’s book was a hysterical scream and a clearly pointed finger. The first article in *Gazeta Wyborcza* proclaimed that it was not us but ‘them’, the ignorant savages. And the discussion went in a terrible direction. They were branded with the stigma of murderers”.³²

The book *Sąsiedzi: Historia zagłady żydowskiego miasteczka* (English edition: *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne*, [actually: occupied] *Poland*) by Jan Tomasz Gross was published between the premieres of Agnieszka Arnold’s two films. The title was inspired by the TV documentary stuck in limbo before release. The book is perhaps best described by a comment made by the filmmaker in an interview:

[...] When I read it [*Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland*], I was struck by fear. Instead of a debate, we would witness a big row, because I feel like the book closes the discussion instead of opening it. Piling up accounts of Polish cruelty, leaving no place for a reflection on the causes of such rabid antisemitism, refusing to look deeper into the past and elaborate on the historical context, failing to use the basic knowledge we have on the mechanisms of breeding hate, escalating emotions – all this makes it impossible to reflect on the issue or debate it beyond the pure crime itself. [...] Krzysztof Godlewski, the mayor of Jedwabne, told me and the press: “The discussion should have started with this film”. And this is a great failure of mine, I know it.³³

Comments from the academic community after the publicisation of the “Jedwabne case”

In October 2002, after it discontinued its investigation, the Institute of National Remembrance (Instytut Pamięci Narodowej – IPN) published the results of its

³² S. Matuszewski, ‘Ogarnął mnie strach’, *Przegląd*, no. 3 (2008), <https://www.tygodnikprzeglad.pl/ogarnal-mnie-strach/> (accessed: 29 Dec. 2023); M. Okoński, ‘Sprawiedliwi z Jedwabnego’, *Tygodnik Powszechny*, no. 15 (2001), <http://www.tygodnik.com.pl/jedwabne/okonski.html> (accessed: 29 Dec. 2023).

³³ J.T. Gross, *Sąsiedzi: Historia zagłady żydowskiego miasteczka* (Sejny, 2000); English edition: id., *Neighbors. The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton–New York, 2001); Matuszewski, ‘Ogarnął mnie strach’; M. Okoński, ‘Sprawiedliwi z Jedwabnego’, *Tygodnik Powszechny*, no. 15 (2001), <http://www.tygodnik.com.pl/jedwabne/okonski.html> (accessed: 29 Dec. 2016).

research in two volumes titled *Wokół Jedwabnego* [“On Jedwabne”]. The first volume comprised articles describing the causes, discussing the common beliefs held about *Selbstreinigungsaktionen*, and documenting the post-war efforts to bring to justice the perpetrators of the murders on Jewish residents of Podlasie/Podlachia/Podlachien. The introduction was written by Paweł Machcewicz, who referred to the “Jedwabne debate” and signalled the angles of the research. Four historians wrote articles dealing with the situation before the *Selbstreinigungsaktionen*: Jan J. Milewski presented the Polish-Jewish relations in Jedwabne and its environs under the Second Polish Republic and during the Soviet occupation until 1941. Marek Wierzbicki tackled the issue of the coexistence of Polish and Jewish neighbours in Podlasie/Podlachia/Podlachien during the Soviet occupation. Their articles were supplemented by the text by Marcin Urynowicz, who analysed the demography of the Łomża region from the first half of the twentieth century until 1941. Dariusz Libionka retraced the attitude of the Catholic Church in the Łomża Diocese towards the Jewish population and the surge of antisemitism in Podlasie/Podlachia/Podlachien in the 1930s and early stages of the Shoah. Edmund Dmitrów and Andrzej Żbikowski devoted their texts to the *Selbstreinigungsaktionen*. In the article titled “Operational Units of the German Security Police and Security Service and the Beginning of the Extermination of Jews in Łomża and Białystok Region in Summer 1941”, the former focused primarily on the German instigators and perpetrators, while the latter – on the Polish participants of these events. Dmitrów presented an overview of the Orpo and SS operational groups, military units from the support division, and local police and SS structures involved in inciting genocide in the Podlasie/Podlachia/Podlachien region in the summer of 1941. Both historians based their research on an almost identical set of sources from the IPN Archive, although Dmitrów also used source editions of documents concerning the preparations of the RSHA and the tasks and orders given to EG B as well as post-war German court and prosecution files. Andrzej Rzepliński dissected the 1949 investigation and court proceedings from a legal point of view. At the time, the authorities of the Polish People’s Republic indicted 22 Poles, 12 of whom were convicted for participating in the *Selbstreinigungsaktionen* in Jedwabne on 10 July 1941, while the rest were acquitted. Tomasz Szarota discussed the most important elements of the dispute surrounding the mass murders in Podlasie before May 2000.

Volume Two comprised 440 documents presenting the roots of the events in Podlasie/Podlachia/Podlachien as well as the circumstances and course of the *Selbstreinigungsaktionen* in the Łomża and Białystok region. It included Polish, Jewish, German, and Soviet records produced before 1974. Michał Gnatowski presented a selection of Soviet materials concerning the inhabitants of the seized territories and the nascent underground independence movement in Podlasie/Podlachia/Podlachien in 1939–41. Waldemar Grabowski overviewed the reports of the Polish Underground State, referring to the situation in the Łomża and Białystok

region after the outbreak of the German-Soviet war. Marek Wierzbicki analysed Polish accounts of Soviet occupation in the newly established Belostok Oblast. Selected accounts of the *Selbstreinigungsaktionen* given by Jewish survivors were presented by Sylwia Szymańska and Andrzej Żbikowski. An edition of post-war investigation and court files was prepared by Jan J. Milewski (documentation on Radziłów from the years 1945–58) and Krzysztof Persak (sources on the massacre in Jedwabne). The volume comprising source material contained only four German (*Heer*) documents describing the activities of the Sicherungsdivision in Podlasie/Podlachia/Podlachien after 22 June 1941; they were compiled by Edmund Dmitrów. At this point, it is important to note that the publication did not include any archival sources produced by German SS structures, *Teilkommandos*, or *Einsatzgruppen* in the summer of 1941. Time has shown that the editors of the volume omitted numerous documents from the German archives – after a short online search, we have located over 10,000 pages of documents³⁴ – the POLIN Museum, the Warsaw Ghetto Museum, the Faculty of History at the University of Warsaw and the Institute of National Remembrance – Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation were not interested in 2021–23 in research and study those documents. None of these institutions responded to the proposed query project in German archives.³⁵

An important historian's voice in the discussion was provided by Professor Tomasz Szarota, who found out about the *Selbstreinigungsaktionen* in Podlasie/Podlachia/Podlachien from the article by J.T. Gross titled “Summer 1941 in Jedwabne. Preliminary Research on the Participation of Local Communities in the Extermination of the Jewish People during the Second World War” written for the volume *Europa nieprowincjonalna* [“Non-Provincial Europe”] published in memory of Professor Tomasz Strzembosz. Having read the text, Professor Szarota decided to explore the issue of pogroms and *Selbstreinigungsaktionen*. This led him to writing the important work titled *U progu Zagłady*.³⁶ He also greatly contributed to the debate through his journalistic texts on Jedwabne and his discourse with Jan

³⁴ One of them, although unfortunately disappointing, is the file from the collections Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg: BAL, B 162/30347 – *Massentötung von 900 polnischen Juden in Jedwabne (Reg. Bez. Białystok) durch Angehörige des Gendameriepostens Jedwabne im Juli 1941* (1974–2009).

³⁵ Similarly, those institutions did not respond to the examination of German documents on another Shoah issues – the Warsaw Ghetto and deportations of the Jewish population and Judenjagde from the so-called “Warsaw Death Ring” (before the 80th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising). *Wokół Jedwabnego*, ed. P. Machcewicz and K. Persak, vol. 1–2.

³⁶ T. Szarota, *U progu Zagłady. Zajścia antyżydowskie i pogromy w okupowanej Europie* (Warszawa, 2000); an English translation was published 15 years later: *On the Threshold of the Holocaust: Anti-Jewish Riots and Pogroms in Occupied Europe: Warsaw – Paris – The Hague – Amsterdam – Antwerp – Kaunas... Studies in History, Memory and Politics* (Frankfurt am Main, 2015); J.T. Gross, ‘Lato 1941 w Jedwabnem. Przyczynek do badań nad udziałem społeczności lokalnych w eksterminacji narodu żydowskiego w latach II wojny światowej’, in: *Europa nieprowincjonalna*, pp. 1098–103.

Tomasz Gross.³⁷ Of similar significance was the English-language edition of the *Więź* publication ‘Thou Shalt Not Kill. Poles on Jedwabne’ (translated by William Brand) and the American edition of *The Neighbors Respond*. Another important thread was offered by the translation of a German EG B document by Jan Bańbor. There were naturally voices of both approval and criticism directed at *Sqsiady*.³⁸ Monographs by Bogdan Musiał are of note, as he makes use of both German and Soviet documents and sets unexpected sources against one another. The issue of *Selbstreinigungsaktionen* is practically absent from the extensive doctoral dissertation of Christian Ingrao – even though the work deals with the presence of SS and SD officers in Einsatzgruppen.³⁹

Mirosław Tryczyk’s doctoral dissertation provided no new information, as it was based exclusively on Polish documents and accounts collected in the Podlasie region.⁴⁰ The author’s argument was harshly judged and criticised by historians specialising in the Shoah, whose worldview could hardly be described as conservative. In this perspective, it was astonishing that Dr Tryczyk’s conclusions were so unnuanced and emotional, which undoubtedly was his way of redeeming the guilt of his family – its participation in the aforementioned *Selbstreinigungsaktionen*. He himself admitted that it was “a projection of the fate of any young Pole born after the Holocaust who started to uncover the tragic past of his family, his country, his town or village. Anyone who, similarly to Zbigniew Romaniuk [historian from Brańsk who was collecting matzevot from the Jewish cemetery – author’s

³⁷ T. Szarota, ‘Czy na pewno wszystko już wiemy?’, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 2–3 Dec. 2000; id., ‘Diabelskie szczegóły. Rozmawia z Prof. Tomaszem Szarota Jacek Żakowski’, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 18–19 XI 2000, pp. 10–12; id., ‘Jedwabne bez stereotypów’, *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 28 Apr. 2002; J.T. Gross, ‘Trochę szkoda, że nie pisze się historii, chodząc po barach...’, *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 5 May 2002; T. Szarota, ‘Zmarnowana szansa’, *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 12 May 2002.

³⁸ Bańbor, ‘Zwyczajna twarz’, pp. 12–13; M. Chodakiewicz, ‘Kłopoty z kuracją szokową’, *Rzeczpospolita*, 5 Jan. 2001; P. Gontarczyk, ‘Gross kontra fakty’, *Życie*, 31 Jan. 2001; B. Musiał, ‘Historiografia mityczna’, *Rzeczpospolita*, 24–25 Feb. 2001; K. Jasiewicz, ‘Śąsiedzi niezbadani’, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 9–10 Dec. 2000; T. Strzembosz, ‘Przemilczana kolaboracja’, *Rzeczpospolita*, 27–28 Jan. 2001; G. Szczęsna, ‘“The Blood of Jedwabne,” Kontakty, 7 May 2000’, in: *The Neighbors Respond: The Controversy over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland*, ed. A. Polonsky, J.B. Michlic (Princeton University Press, 2004), pp. 60–63; M. Kaczyńska, ‘Żydzi spaleni w stodole’, *Gazeta Współczesna*, 14 July 2000; A. Willma, ‘Broda mojego syna’, *Gazeta Pomorska*, 4 Aug. 2000. Some of these articles have been published in English translation in the volume: *Thou Shalt Not Kill. Poles in Jedwabne*, ed. W. Brand (Warszawa, 2001). See also *The Neighbors Respond: The Controversy over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland*, ed. A. Polonsky, J.B. Michlic (Princeton–New York, 2003).

³⁹ ‘Aktion Reinhardt’. *Der Völkermord an den Juden im Generalgouvernement 1941–1944*, ed. B. Musiał (Osnabrück, 2004); Ch. Ingrao, *Wierzyć i niszczyć. Intelektualiści w machinie wojennej SS* (Wołowiec, 2013); B. Musiał, *Deutsche Zivilverwaltung und Judenverfolgung im Generalgouvernement: eine Fallstudie zum Distrikt Lublin 1939–1944* (Wiesbaden, 2000); id., *Rozstrzelać elementy kontrrewolucyjne! Brutalizacja wojny niemiecko-sowieckiej latem 1941 roku* (Warszawa, 2001) [original title: *Konterrevolutionäre Elemente sind zu erschießen*, Berlin, 2000]; id., *Sowieccy partyzanci 1941–1944. Mity i rzeczywistość* (Poznań, 2014).

⁴⁰ M. Tryczyk, *Miasta śmierci. Sąsiedzkie pogromy Żydów* (Warszawa, 2015).

note], was forced to face the incredulity and, at times, hostility from those who were trying to hide this history”. Tryczyk’s work was a form of redemption for the crimes of the members of his family, but unfortunately, the author did not confront it with German sources and forgot about one of the fundamental rules of academic research: *sine ira et studio* (“without anger and prejudice”). His next book *Drzazga. Kłamstwa silniejsze niż śmierć* [“A Splinter. Lies Stronger Than Death”], describing the pogroms of Jews in 1941 and their consequences for contemporary Poland – here, too, the author forgot about the principle mentioned above and did not compare his research with German documents.⁴¹

A similar case is the ambitious, two-volume edition of *Jedwabne. Historia prawdziwa* [“Jedwabne. A True Story”], which unfortunately manipulates the truth to fit preconceived assumptions. Its three authors decided to prove that the Poles did not murder their Jewish neighbours, but they based their argument solely on Polish documents from postwar investigations of prosecutor of the Institute of National Remembrance. They concluded that the perpetrators of the murders of Jews in Podlasie had been German (and not Austrian) exterminators – a thesis which is hard to accept. According to the bibliography, the authors referred to the most important archival fonds from the investigation of the District Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation in Białystok. Following a series of archive searches supervised by Dr Tomasz Sommer, the team of authors based its work on the main investigation file with ref. no. S 1/00/Zn of Prosecutor Radosław J. Ignatiew “in the case of burning people of Jewish nationality on 10 July 1941 in Jedwabne, suspected of committing the crime defined in Art. 1 item 1 of the Decree of 31 August 1944”. In total, the 38 volumes of the file comprise 7,418 folios. Unfortunately, the research team and authors at the same time in question also failed to discover the documentation stored in German archives and confront it with Polish records. It is precisely the German material which holds the key to revealing the German instigation behind the crimes perpetrated during *Selbstreinigungsaktionen* by the local population, in this case by Poles. In the first volume, the authors discussed the sources in terms of their content and provided a critical review of earlier monographs and articles devoted to the Jedwabne massacre. Here, however, just like they did with the archival documents, they omitted German printed sources, academic publications, and press.

⁴¹ This book also received positive reviews from, among others: Efraim Zuroff from The Simon Wiesenthal Center in Jerusalem and prof. John T. Pawlikowski from The Holocaust Museum in Washington. It was translated into English by prof. Frank Szmulowicz and was published in the American academical publishing house Rowman & Littlefield, under the title *The Towns of Death. Pogroms Against Jews by Their Neighbors*, vide: *ibid.*, p. 376; K. Persak, ‘Wydmuszka. Lektura krytyczna Miast śmierci Mirosława Tryczyka’, *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały*, vol. 12 (2016), 357–74; N. Aleksion, ‘Zmarnowana szansa. O “Miastach śmierci” Mirosława Tryczyka’, *Kultura Liberalna*, no. 367(3) (2016), <https://kulturaliberalna.pl/2016/01/19/zmarnowana-szansa-o-miastach-smierci-miroslaw-traczyka/> (accessed: 15 July 2021).

The second volume comprised 299 archival accounts and testimonies from the aforementioned investigation. The authors prided themselves on “a comprehensive discussion of the issue on the basis of complete available material”, although they had not even made a single trip to Germany. Among the archival sources they presented, there was only one (sic!) post-war German document produced by the Public Prosecutor’s Office in Hamburg. Records of interrogations from the investigation no. 141 Js 223/64 may bring forth many significant details and new pieces of information, even with the witnesses’ constant “memory” problems. The testimony of Schaper verged on slapstick, as he explained that he had gotten a bad case of diarrhoea during the massacre.⁴²

There is one subchapter, titled “SS-Ei[n]satzgruppen: Lost in Action”, two pages and six lines in total, which focuses on the figures of SS-Obersturmführer Hermann Schaper and SS-Hauptsturmführer Wolfgang Birkner, not making a single mention about Dienststelle “Vineta” – Propagandadienst Ostraum e.V or *Selbstreinigungsaktionen* or others *Teilkommandos*. Unfortunately, the authors betrayed their total lack of knowledge in German terms and the structure of extermination squads, including SS, SD, and Orpo officers – they were unaware that *Teilkommandos*, formed ad hoc in the General Government and East Prussia, operated in Podlasie as a replacement for EG B, which on 10 July was present in Minsk. Similarly surprising are the conclusions drawn by the authors: “The crime was perpetrated by a fairly large (20–30 people, although this number may have fluctuated) group of Germans composed of members of various military and police formations”. This summary is far too vague – in fact, it has the same depth as the statement on Jedwabne made by Wolfgang Curilla in his aforementioned first book on auxiliary police, *Die deutsche Ordnungspolizei und der Holocaust im Baltikum und in Weißrussland*. Similarly, Curilla’s second, a huge, over a thousand-pages monograph *Der Judenmord in Polen und die deutsche Ordnungspolizei 1939–1945* provides little new information regarding “Jedwabne Complex”, based mainly on Polish edition *Wokół Jedwabnego*.⁴³

Subsequent foreign editions of the book *Sąsiedzi* led to the publication of new English-language works or the re-emergence of earlier studies entirely devoted to or just mentioning the issue of *Selbstreinigungsaktionen* in Podlasie and beyond. Among the most influential monographs in English were those penned by Raul Hilberg. An important role was also played by the books and articles by Andrew Ezergailis on the occupation period in Latvia and by French MacLean on the EG officer corps. A voice that supplemented the narrative of Jedwabne was a book by Marek Jan Chodakiewicz, which used available Polish sources but lacked references to the

⁴² T. Sommer, M.J. Chodakiewicz, Z. Stankiewicz, *Jedwabne. Historia Prawdziwa*, vol. 2 (Warszawa, 2021), pp. 1295–98 [Document no. 275 – 2 września 1965 r., Hamburg, Niemcy. Notatka starszego prokuratora Sądu Krajowego w Hamburgu, Otto].

⁴³ Curilla, *Der Judenmord in Polen*, pp. 301–303; id., *Die deutsche Ordnungspolizei*, pp. 58–61 and 630; Sommer, Chodakiewicz, Stankiewicz, *Jedwabne*, pp. 58–61.

materials stored in German archives. Our knowledge of the reality of collaboration was deepened by the monographs by Martin Dean and Leonid Rein, although they sadly only occasionally mentioned the issue of *Selbstreinigungsaktionen*. The wealth of Romanian archives was explored by Radu Ioanid and Dennis Deletant, and Hungarian ones – by Randolph L. Braham.⁴⁴

Some of the most significant secondary sources in Russian are the works by Ivan Kovtun and Dmitry Zhukov, who discuss the issue of collaboration and antisemitic propaganda. They have published as many as fifteen books on the collaboration of Soviet citizens with the Germans. Referring to the issue of *Selbstreinigungsaktionen* is the monograph on the Russian auxiliary police, which has been released in three editions so far. In it, the Russian authors discussed the massacre in Rostov-on-Don in which 27,000 Jews were shot in Zmiyevskaya Balka (Змиївська балка) by officers of the German *Sonderkommando 10a/EG D* and by Russian policemen from the Rostov Ordnungsdienst. We do not know much about the process of preparing for the massacre, assembling the victims, and transporting them to the execution site – the involvement of the local Russian population from Rostov-on-Don.⁴⁵

We should also mention *Bloodlands*, a seminal publication by American historian Timothy Snyder. The author subverted many of the common assumptions identifying genocide with the Shoah. The Germans and the Soviets often used primitive killing methods. Out of the 14 million civilians and POWs murdered in the described territories in 1933–45, over half died of starvation. Snyder pointed out that the Germans did not struggle with finding people willing to cooperate in exterminating the Jews. Thousands of Jewish people, both men and women and children, lost their lives in the course of the “self-cleansing actions” inspired and supported by the Germans. The author cited Reinhard Heydrich’s orders issued in June and July 1941. Naturally, he also mentioned the wave of local

⁴⁴ R.L. Braham, *The Politics of Genocide: The Holocaust in Hungary*, vol. 1–2 (New York, 1994); id., *The Wartime System of Labor Service in Hungary: Varieties of Experiences* (New York, 1995); M.J. Chodakiewicz, *The Massacre in Jedwabne, July 10, 1941: Before, During, After* (New York, 2005); Polish edition: *Mord w Jedwabnem 10 lipca 1941: prolog, przebieg, pokłosie* (Kraków, 2012); *Contested Memories: Poles and Jews during the Holocaust and Its Aftermath*, ed. J.D. Zimmerman, Z. Gitelman (New Brunswick, 2003); M. Dean, *Collaboration in the Holocaust: Crimes of the Local Police in Belorussia and Ukraine, 1941–44* (London, 2003); D. Deletant, *Rumunia. Zapomniany sojusznik Hitlera* (Warszawa, 2011); A. Ezergailis, *The Holocaust in Latvia, 1941–1944: The Missing Center* (Washington, DC, 1996); id., *Nazi/Soviet Disinformation about the Holocaust in Latvia: Daugavas vanagi Who are they?* (Riga, 2005); R. Hilberg, *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders. The Jewish Catastrophe 1933–1945* (New York, 1993); R. Ioanid, *The Iasi Pogrom, June–July 1941: A Photo Documentary from the Holocaust in Romania* (Bloomington–Indianapolis, 2017); F. MacLean, *The Field Men: The SS Officers Who Led the Einsatzkommandos – the Nazi Mobile Killing Units* (Atglen, 1999); L. Rein, *The Kings and the Pawns: Collaboration in Byelorussia during World War II* (New York, 2011).

⁴⁵ Д. Жуков, И. Ковтун, *Русская полиция* (Москва, 2010); eid., *Полицай: история, судьбы и преступления* (Москва, 2016); eid., *Антисемитская пропаганда*.

Selbstreinigungsaktionen (to which he referred as “pogroms”) in the entire rear area of the German army by the frontline stretching from Latvia to Bessarabia after the outbreak of the German-Soviet war. The Germans incited thousands of residents of these lands, and tens of thousands of inhabitants of Baltic countries, Belarusians, Russian, and Ukrainians were recruited to OD/Hipo/Schuma and assisted the Germans in the implementation of their genocidal plan of the annihilation of Jews. Snyder put a spotlight on the issue of the role played by the Jews in the Soviet administrative apparatus and state terror structures, emphasising that “[v]iolence against Jews served to bring the Germans and elements of the local non-Jewish population closer together. [...] The idea that only Jews served communists was convenient not just for the occupiers but for some of the occupied as well”.⁴⁶

It is also important to study the exemplary and breakthrough monograph *Intimate Violence* by Jeffrey S. Kopstein and Jason Wittenberg, which sought to explain the wave of *Selbstreinigungsaktionen* in 1941 (traditionally called “pogroms”). In many aspects, it is the best study on this particular issue since the book’s publication initiated the debate, Gross’s *Sąsiedzi*. The two American political scientists provided a wide-ranging and multi-dimensional analysis, not limiting their argument solely to interpreting historical events. They referred to theories of interethnic and intergroup violence – basing their research on the rich achievements of sociological literature dealing with the issues of intersocial aggression. They also used the most recent generation of historiographical text on the Shoah, which analysed violence between societies in various contexts. Kopstein and Wittenberg listed as particularly significant the works by sociologist Hubert M. Blalock Jr, Hebrew scholars Sol Goldberg and Anna Shternshis, and historians Doris Bergen, John Connelly, Antony Polonsky, and Timothy Snyder.

As mentioned, the authors did more than simply describe the situation within the historical context of ethnic relations from the late nineteenth century until 1941. They also studied original data from Polish censuses carried out in 1921 and 1931 and the results of Polish parliamentary elections of 1922 and 1928 (from over 2,000 localities). They used sources concerning pogroms, including those produced by the participants and witnesses of the events who had first-hand knowledge of how they unfolded. The authors confronted their hypotheses with a multitude of statistical analyses, taking into account nonparametric models, differences in medians, and ecological inference. They supported their argument by comparing the situation in regions with a predominance of Polish (Białostockie and Poleskie Voivodeships) and Ukrainian (Wołyńskie, Lwowskie, Stanisławowskie, and Tarnopolskie Voivodeships) populations, and even studied territories beyond the borders of the Second Polish Republic – Lithuania, Greece, Romania, India, and the USA. They also elaborated on the theme of violence between ethnic groups. The main task undertaken by Kopstein and Wittenberg

⁴⁶ T.D. Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (New York, 2010), p. 194.

was to question the accuracy and legitimacy of all previous efforts to explain *Selbstreinigungsaktionen*.

The arguments against the authors' previous descriptions of "self-cleansing actions" are hard to refute. According to Kopstein and Wittenberg, it is impossible to scientifically prove that the motive of the local population was retaliation for collaborating with the Soviets. The authors emphasise that Jews welcomed the arrival of the Red Army, but they were not generally collaborators (except for a minority who had abandoned Judaism). This positive attitude derived from the promise of equality declared by the Soviets, as the Second Polish Republic had failed the Jewish population in this respect. Jews were thus able to assume administrative positions (usually lower-rank, more exposed to the general public, which on this basis drew conclusions about the Jewish collaboration). This assumption is disproven by the data from Belostok Oblast from 1940, since Jews constituted only 2 per cent of staff in the rural municipality government, 9 per cent of active Komsomol members, 5.4 per cent of "government candidates", and 4 per cent of the staff of VKP(b). At the same time, they made up 12 per cent of the oblast population, which means they were still underrepresented in the structures of power.

The Americans pointed out that *Selbstreinigungsaktionen* were more frequently carried out in localities where there had been very meagre support for communism before the war compared to the ones in which the communists boasted a larger number of advocates. This was associated with the fact that a bigger percentage of Belarusians and Ukrainians supported communist ideas. The authors prove false the thesis according to which the root of "self-cleansing actions" was the antisemitism of the Christian population. It is hard not to agree with their arguments, especially since they cited data showing that *Selbstreinigungsaktionen* were only carried out in 9 per cent of all localities, and no similar incident occurred in over 90 per cent. If hatred for Jews had been that widespread and closely tied with Christian denominations (as argued by many scholars), then the wave of massacres would have surely spread to many more places and, in fact, should have flooded the entire occupied territory – and yet this is not what happened. Kopstein and Wittenberg have one answer to this paradox – many historians have exaggerated the scale of antisemitism in the Second Polish Republic (and other Eastern European countries) by equating it to Christianity. The situation of Jews was not quite as tragic as painted by many scholars, despite the pogroms under Russian rule and two subsequent waves of massacres of Jews after the First World War (1918–20 and the 1930s), economic boycott, and segregation in the form of "ghetto benches". Evidence of this was the perseverance of Jewish petty trade, which still dominated the market as late as 1938, and the good condition of Jewish wholesale trade. Concomitantly, the civil liberties granted to Jews allowed their cultural and political life to flourish and resulted in the foundation of numerous social organisations, strong self-government, Jewish education, and the Yiddish and Hebrew press. The Americans indicated that some Polish political parties

(PPS [Polish Socialist Party] and BBWR [Nonpartisan Bloc for Cooperation with the Government]) promoted the friendly coexistence of Poles and Jews. They also emphasised that many Polish people held pro-Jewish views or were unsusceptible to antisemitism. It did not have nearly enough power to trigger events as bloody as those which took place in 1941.

Another explanation for “self-cleansing actions” refuted by Kopstein and Wittenberg is one associated with the plunder of Jewish property and the economic position of Jews. According to this reasoning, the massacres were most likely to occur in places where the economic disparities between Jews and non-Jews were the most pronounced. The authors measured it on the basis of the financial support provided to the poorest Jewish co-operatives by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee – JDC – Joint (through zero-interest loans for the most destitute Jews). As it turned out, *Selbstreinigungsaktionen* took place in localities inhabited by a large percentage of poor Jews and petty merchants. The massacres occurred much less frequently in areas where the Jewish community dominated economically over the Christians. The authors did not discuss why the issue of plundering Jewish property played a less important role in initiating *Selbstreinigungsaktionen* in towns and villages inhabited mostly by Poles as compared to those with a predominantly Ukrainian population, whose violence was motivated by the potential material gains. Kopstein and Wittenberg explained the actual cause of “self-cleansing actions” with the use of the theory of political threat, in which the minority is perceived as endangering the dominant position of the majority.

As a result, the majority engages in actions meant to protect its dominance. The authors pointed out that such a dynamic could be observed in the Second Polish Republic. *Selbstreinigungsaktionen* occurred in places in which the non-Jews considered the Jews a threat to their privileged position. The risk for massacres was diminished by the following factors: greater popularity of political parties promoting friendly Polish-Jewish relations; demographic growth of the Jewish community – the bigger its percentage in the overall population, the lesser the likelihood of anti-Jewish incidents; the intensity of Jewish emancipation efforts, which impacted the potential for physical aggression – half of all votes in the eastern provinces of the Second Polish Republic was given to the Bloc of National Minorities (established on the initiative of Jewish political circles). The case of Jedwabne testifies to the influence of political divisions and demography. The predominant group in the local population were Jews (76 per cent), with the community strongly leaning towards Zionism. The majority of Poles were supporters of National Democracy (63 per cent of votes).

Political factors help explain the particular brutality of the *Selbstreinigungsaktion* in Lvov, which was not associated with Ukrainian antisemitism. The negative emotions of the Ukrainians should have first and foremost turned them against the (more widely disliked) Poles. However, the “self-cleansing action” targeted Jews, which was a way of currying favour with the Germans (and, importantly,

was also incited by intensified German propaganda). Lithuania was another example of an area in which political fears resulted in the occurrence of bloody *Selbstreinigungsaktionen*. The same mechanism could be observed in Romania – in Bessarabia, the culprits were Romanians, and in Northern Bukovina – Ukrainians. The authors also noticed similar dynamics in Greece (the passive Jews of Athens did not suffer any violence, unlike the politically engaged Zionists from Thessaloniki) and in nineteenth-century Germany (where pogroms were a reaction to the assimilation and emancipation of Jews). Historians studying the history of Polish-Jewish relations and the Shoah would greatly benefit from reading the book by Kopstein and Wittenberg and adopting at least some of their research methods. We should hope to see such precision and thoroughness in historical research across the board – for all scholars to refrain from emotionality and approach their arguments in line with the aforementioned fundamental rule – *sine ira et studio*.⁴⁷

A glaring element of this international debate is the German (and Austrian) reluctance to take responsibility for the crimes of “self-cleansing actions” and minimisation of their scale. To this day, no German-language monograph on *Selbstreinigungsaktionen* has been written. The issue is hardly ever tackled in the works of German historians. There has been no critical edition of source documents concerning Einsatzgruppe B – one published collection of documents has discussed EG D and Einsatzgruppen reports, but only until the end of 1941. Individual mentions of *Selbstreinigungsaktionen* can be found in academic monographs and popular science works by Wolfgang Curilla, Christoph Dieckmann, Christian Gerlach, Jörn Hasenclever, Dieter Pohl, Wolfram Wette. Surprisingly, two monographies by Curilla, comprising over one thousand pages, includes only one sentence referring to Jedwabne, appearing not in the main text but in a footnote in one case, and three pages in the other.⁴⁸

It is important to shed a light on the complicity of Austrian and German officers in actions instigating the local population to commit mass murders as part of the

⁴⁷ J.S. Kopstein, J. Wittenberg, *Intimate Violence. Anti-Jewish Pogroms on the Eve of the Holocaust* (Ithaca–London, 2018).

⁴⁸ Curilla, *Die deutsche Ordnungspolizei*, p. 130; id., *Der Judenmord in Polen*; Ch. Dieckmann, *Deutsche Besatzungspolitik in Litauen 1941–1944* (Göttingen, 2016); B. Quinkert, Ch. Dieckmann, T. Tönsmeier, *Kooperation und Verbrechen: Formen der “Kollaboration” im östlichen Europa 1939–1945* (Göttingen, 2012); M.B. Felder, *Lettland im Zweiten Weltkrieg. Zwischen sowjetischen und deutschen Besatzern 1940–1946* (Paderborn, 2009); Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde*; J. Hasenclever, *Wehrmacht und Besatzungspolitik in der Sowjetunion: die Befehlshaber der rückwärtigen Heeresgebiete 1941–1943* (Paderborn–München–Wien–Zürich, 2010); P. Kohl, *Der Krieg der deutschen Wehrmacht und der Polizei 1941–1944: Sowjetische Überlebende berichten* (Frankfurt am Main, 2016); D. Pohl, *Die Herrschaft der Wehrmacht: deutsche Militärbesatzung und einheimische Bevölkerung in der Sowjetunion 1941–1944* (Frankfurt am Main, 2011); id., *Nationalsozialistische Judenverfolgung in Ostgalizien 1941–1944: Organisation und Durchführung eines staatlichen Massenverbrechens* (München–Wien, 1997); W. Wette, *Karl Jäger: Mörder der litauischen Juden* (Frankfurt am Main, 2011); id., *Die Wehrmacht: Feindbilder, Vernichtungskrieg, Legenden* (Frankfurt am Main, 2002); Polish edition: *Wehrmacht. Legenda i rzeczywistość* (Kraków, 2008).

Selbstreinigungsaktionen. To achieve this, future research should include a thorough study of German archives – federal and land records, court and combatant files – which will open access to many interesting sources that are yet to be discovered. The same stands for archives in Central and Eastern European countries and in North America. As for the American documentation, it is telling that the journal of Alfred Rosenberg was only discovered in the NARA as late as 2013. Historians working in the field of Holocaust Studies have the work cut out for them. Just clearing up the doubts concerning the years 1939–45 (or the year 1941 in particular) is going to take years of analysing German and Soviet documents, including those produced in Lithuanian, Latvian, Belarusian, Ukrainian, and Russian. In this light, the proposal of expanding the definition of Holocaust Studies, which was put forward by Professor Dan Michman of Yad Vashem in Jerusalem at the academic conference *Conceptualisations of the Holocaust since the 1990s* (5–7 December 2016, German Historical Institute in Warsaw) should first and foremost pertain to this forgotten stage of the Shoah. According to the Israeli historian, the definition of the Shoah should not be limited to the extermination of European Jews, as it was only one manifestation of a broader phenomenon. The scholarly discipline of Holocaust Studies, therefore, should not be boiled down to research on genocide and should embrace the perspective of intellectual and cultural history. Professor Michman’s views align with the current postulates of broadening the scope of classical historical sciences with elements of anthropological, sociological, social, cultural, or psychological perspectives. Meanwhile, the watershed moment only preliminarily introduced in this article, namely the period of genocidal German operations (using the involvement of local populations) conducted in the rear area of the Eastern Front until the autumn of 1942, remains largely unexplored. The same may be said of many other episodes, as in the case of those mentioned earlier, understudied archival materials concerning the Warsaw ghetto. Let the following iconic quote serve as our conclusion: “I am an advocate of precision because I believe that only the truth is interesting. However, the truth also tends to be richer and more complex and colourful than its contrived reworkings”. In conclusion, we must remember to keep the reiterated basic principle of historical studies – *sine ira et studio*.⁴⁹

Abstract

The article discusses the fully abandoned research of the “Jedwabne complex”. The media frenzy around the subject was triggered by the publication of the book *Sąsiedzi* [“Neighbors”] by Jan Tomasz Gross – not by the documentary with the same title directed by Agnieszka Arnold (who actually discovered the crime). The two volumes on the issue published by the Institute

⁴⁹ J. Mackiewicz, ‘Literatura contra faktologia’, *Kultura*, no. 7–8(310–311) (1973), 182–83; and ‘Konferencja: Konceptualizacje Holokaustu od lat 90.’, 20 Dec. 2016, <https://www.dhi.waw.pl/pl/aktualnosci/detail/konferencja-konceptualizacje-holokaustu-od-lat-90/> (accessed: 5 Jan. 2024).

of National Remembrance failed to shed light on the German instigation behind “self-cleansing actions” (*Selbstrenigungsaktionen*) in which the local population carried out massacres of Jews. A later two-volume publication by three Polish authors did not contribute much to the discussion, as it was written with a preconceived conviction of the innocence of Poles and did not confront Polish documents with German sources. German historiography (like all Eastern European countries) has shied away from studying the subject. A new hope appeared with *Intimate Violence*, an unbiased monograph by two American political scientists, Jeffrey S. Kosptein and Jason Wittenberg. The present paper also points to certain hitherto undiscussed aspects of the research problem concerning the genesis of the *Selbstrenigungsaktionen*, and their implementation by the Germans and Austrians at the hands of local communities. Correspondingly, historians have failed to study the Machiavellian schemes of SS, SD, and Ordnungspolizei officers and Wehrmacht and Propagandakompanie soldiers, who documented the course of the massacres to produce evidence of the purported savagery of the inhabitants of Central and Eastern Europe. Another closely linked issue is the nearly complete absence in the historiography of the discussion of activities carried out by Dienststelle VINETA – Propagandadienst Ostrau e.V. (apart from a single book from a revisionist publishing house). Historians have their work cut out for them.

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