Introduction

> Jewish survivor: "I encountered extraordinary people … [Ukrainians] helped me to survive in the camp."[1]
>
> Jewish survivor: "The Moldovans … were the people who helped the Germans, they burned houses and people … The Moldovans were worse than the SS."[2]

People reacted differently to the opportunities the Holocaust created to either victimize or to aid their Jewish neighbors. Unquestionably, racist regimes and the executioners whom they empowered charted and carried out the attempt to destroy the Jewish population, and it was nearly impossible for individuals outside official structures significantly to influence the man-made catastrophe that engulfed European Jewry. However, Nazi and other government policies aside, the behavior of the Gentile population among whom Jews lived functioned as a separate factor that, while not decisive, increased or decreased the chances of Jewish survival. Gentiles living in Eastern Europe took a variety of actions toward Jewish people. Some populations proved more likely to abuse Jews, engaging in theft, physical violence, rape, and murder. Other groups not only were less likely to commit abuse, but also more likely to behave in a humane manner, offering food, harboring Jewish children, or hiding fugitives. This book aims to substantiate and explain this difference by underlining the role and the responsibility of pre–WWII state policies in fostering either animosity or goodwill among various population groups.

[1] Fanya Sheyn, interviewed by Diana Dumitru, Washington, DC, December 2005.
[2] Interview with Evghenia Sherman, Yad Vashem Archives (YVA), V.T/1757.

Following the German invasion of the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941, spontaneous attacks by civilians against Jews broke out across a swath of Eastern Europe stretching roughly from the Baltic to the Black Sea. A massacre in the Polish town of Jedwabne – where locals murdered the entire local Jewish population using "stones, wooden clubs, iron bars, fire, and water" – has come to symbolize the brutality unleashed at that time.[3] Yet on the territory that was part of the Soviet Union before 1939 a seemingly different scenario transpired. Barbara Epstein recently recounted the story of the Minsk ghetto, bringing to light the solidarity between Jews and non-Jews in occupied prewar Soviet Belorussia. She insists that mutual aid and support enabled a mass flight of Jews to partisan units in the forests, thereby saving thousands.[4]

Several other researchers, placing available information into a comparative framework, note that long-time Soviet civilians generally did not participate in anti-Jewish violence, unlike the populations of neighboring Eastern European territories (notably those the USSR had recently occupied).[5] The editors of an anthology on the Holocaust in Ukraine point to the "interesting" fact that the population of central and eastern Ukraine, regions previously part of the USSR, refrained even when the German Einsatzkommandos tried to incite them. In the western Ukrainian regions previously part of Poland, however, dozens of pogroms occurred in the wake of the German invasion.[6] The authors did not provide an explanation for the differences, but suggested that the regional variation "requires greater study."[7] In his examination of the Holocaust in Jewish shtetls, Yehuda Bauer compares "Soviet" Ukrainians with "Polish" Ukrainians, and writes that the former were relatively "less prone to anti-Semitism";

[3] Jan T. Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (New York: Penguin, 2002), 80–81.

[4] Barbara Epstein, *The Minsk Ghetto, 1941–1943: Jewish Resistance and Soviet Internationalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 31.

[5] Yitzhak Arad, "The Local Population in the German-Occupied Territories of the Soviet Union and its Attitude toward the Murder of the Jews," in *Nazi Europe and the Final Solution*, ed. David Bankier and Israel Gutman (Jerusalem: International Institute for Holocaust Research, 2003), 233–48. Amir Weiner points out to the Germans' surprise when antisemitic violence failed to break out following their arrival in Soviet Ukraine. See Amir Weiner, *Making Sense of War: The Second World War and the Fate of Bolshevik Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 276–77.

[6] Ray Brandon and Wendy Lower, "Introduction," in *The Shoah in Ukraine: History, Testimony, Memorialization*, ed. Ray Brandon and Wendy Lower (Bloomington: Indiana University Press in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2008), 14. The authors mention that "the readiness to resort to anti-Jewish violence had clearly receded" among the formerly Soviet population in Ukraine.

[7] Ibid.

he was careful to add, however, that this is a "view as yet unsubstantiated by detailed research," and is therefore "pure speculation."[8] While significant efforts to document and explain the explosion of violence in Eastern Europe have been undertaken, hardly any have been made to clarify and explain the population's attitude in the previously Soviet territories, let alone to compare such attitudes with those just to their west.

Any serious attempt to deal with the issue of variation in attitudes toward Jews in Eastern Europe and the post-1917 Soviet territories raises a host of complicated and puzzling questions. First and foremost, the riddle stems from a growing sense that, beyond individual idiosyncratic differences, the populations of non-Soviet Eastern Europe were on the whole more antisemitic than those of the Soviet Union. How accurate and reliable is this observation? How do we know that the apparent difference did not reflect particular conditions of the Second World War, including the existence of Nazi and Nazi-allied occupation regimes and local variations in the implementation of policies geared toward the destruction of the Jews? Are these two broader areas (Soviet and non-Soviet) comparable, either in terms of pre-existing demography, or on the level of popular antisemitism in earlier periods?

If such factors were to be thoroughly assessed and the same discrepancy still to hold, the next round of analysis would invite renewed scrutiny of prewar Soviet society, questioning our knowledge of nationalism, antisemitism, and the relationship between Jews and non-Jews in the USSR. Can we assume that "the Soviet experiment" ushered in by the Bolshevik Revolution produced positive change in popular attitudes? And if so, what mechanisms drove the shift? Responses to these questions require a serious and critical study. This book offers a contribution regarding these complicated issues.

In the following I undertake a comparative case study of Jewish-Gentile relations in two neighboring regions: Bessarabia and Transnistria, corresponding roughly to the territories of modern-day Moldova and southwest Ukraine.[9] The primary concern is to understand civilians' interactions with Jews during the Holocaust, though not the lethality of the Holocaust overall. That overall lethality can be linked directly to the

[8] Yehuda Bauer, *The Death of the Shtetl* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 52.

[9] Transnistria during World War II included present-day Transnistria, a region within the Republic of Moldova, as well as territory to the east, currently located in present-day Ukraine, and inhabited largely by ethnic Ukrainians. In this study, Transnistria refers to this larger World War II–era geographic region and not only to the present-day territory of Transnistria.

anti-Jewish policies of Romania and Germany, and the killing machines created and controlled by them, including the army and auxiliary units. This book, however, focuses on various local forms of interaction (whether violent or non-violent) between Jews and Gentiles, and seeks to identify and understand differences between Bessarabia and Transnistria. Importantly, it cannot include the regions' populations in their entirety, but instead concentrates on civilians only. Furthermore, the book is not intended as a broader study of comparative violence, but is deliberately planned as a comparison of two sets of multiple attitudes and behaviors among two neighboring populations.

The decision analytically to separate state (e.g., military, police, etc.) and non-state (civilian) actors, and the choice to analyze the latter's attitudes and behavior toward Jews was built on an awareness that while the two groups acted in similar contexts and shared values and affinities, during the period 1941–1944 they differed in the degree of free will they could exercise when dealing with Jews. Aside from legal restrictions imposed by the Romanian or German authorities concerning Gentiles' relationships with Jews, the latitude was undeniably wider among civilians than among those employed in police or military units. While both categories are equally worthwhile subjects of analysis, this study's purpose is to understand how (relatively) free agents of society behaved during the Holocaust and what factors drove their behavior.

When the state orders a soldier or policeman to kill an individual, this dramatically increases the likelihood that this individual will "choose" to kill. More important for the present study, this factor is a constant in both Bessarabia and Transnistria: the state ordered killings and massacres in both territories. There are vital questions that we, as a society, must ask: why does a state order killings, and how do state organs and non-state actors comply with such orders; but these are not the questions being addressed by this work, which asks rather why civilians, on their own initiative and without orders from above, choose to massacre another, unarmed, group in society. The civilians who joined the security services and went on to murder members of the Jewish population as part of the state's genocidal policies are not necessarily comparable to the civilians who on their own accord attacked and murdered members of the Jewish population, many of whom previously had been their neighbors. In both Transnistria and Bessarabia, state organs organized massacres and incited violence against Jews, but only in the latter did so many civilians freely choose to engage in mass murder.

One could argue that an element of free will was present when civilians enrolled in auxiliary police formations, and that one motivation for doing so might have been anti-Jewish feeling. Still, as Martin Dean demonstrated in his research into the crimes of local police in Belorussia and Ukraine, the will to collaborate with the Nazi authorities does not automatically imply an initial desire to kill Jews. In some cases, the enrollees may not have even anticipated this particular task.[10] The role of local residents as state actors in the Holocaust raises a host of distinct and important questions that deserve rigorous attention, but they require another book.

The following, however, goes beyond the presence and absence of violence. Not only was there markedly less violence towards Jews in Transnistria, but more of the civilian population there demonstrated a greater willingness than did their counterparts in Bessarabia to help the intended victims of the Holocaust.

As a case study, the chosen territories of Bessarabia and Transnistria offer a valuable opportunity for research purposes, permitting us to follow two multi-ethnic populations, containing Jewish minorities of similar size and proportion, sharing a similar history and a comparable legacy of antisemitism in the Russian Empire, to which both belonged in the nineteenth century. Throughout the interwar years one of these multi-ethnic populations, that of Transnistria, experienced official policies meant to counter antisemitism and integrate Jews into Soviet society, whereas in Romania the people of Bessarabia continued to witness antisemitic, exclusivist policies deployed against the Jewish populace. During World War II both territories were united under the control of Romania, allied with Nazi Germany; the civilian populations were equally afforded the opportunity, and even encouraged by the Romanian state, to abuse and exploit the Jewish minority. Thus, the only major difference between the two populations is an intervening two-decade period during which one state, the USSR, actively fought against antisemitism and aggressively pursued the integration of the Jewish minority. The results presented below suggest that Soviet citizens who received this sustained, inclusivist "treatment" were less likely to abuse and more likely to aid their Jewish neighbors than was the majority population of the other territory.

[10] Martin Dean, *Collaboration in the Holocaust: Crimes of the Local Police in Belorussia and Ukraine* (New York: St. Martin's Press in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2000).

This inquiry links World War II realities on the ground with prewar history in a causal relationship, focusing specifically on the interaction between state policies and Jewish-Gentile interactions. This book presents those relations as fluid and re/constructible, or at least partly reconstructible, over time, simultaneously telling the story of the state's role in fostering the content of those relations. This study reveals that during the interwar years the Soviet state invested significant resources into building cooperative integration between its Jewish and non-Jewish citizens and that their new relationship became at least partially internalized in society and endured to a measurable extent between 1941 and 1944, when the Soviet state itself exercised no direct power on the territory of Transnistria.

Three categories of action were adopted by the Soviet state in order to foster inter-ethnic cooperation between Jews and other ethnic groups, all part of a much broader modernization project that the Communist Party began after securing power. First, full legal equality was granted to Jewish citizens, along with other minority groups, and the organs of state power forcefully guaranteed this equality. This meant that, in sharp contrast to the tsarist period, Jews were able to reside in locations of their choice; to study at whichever institutions of higher learning they qualified for; and to work in any profession, including the civil service, the police, and other agencies previously closed to them. To be sure, there was a difference between formal rights conferred on Soviet citizens by the constitution and substantive rights that could be exercised in society (e.g., freedom of speech), but the important dimension to be emphasized here is that all citizens received the same substantive rights, regardless of ethnicity. This contrasts sharply with the situation of the Jews and other minorities in interwar Romania, where although formal equality was initially granted, the state then actively worked to circumvent that promise.

The second category of Soviet policies dealt with public discourse, both prohibiting antisemitic statements and promoting a new, positive image of Jews in society. The prohibition of antisemitism was applied in all spheres of public life, from political speech to mass media, and the courts punished transgressions. Equally important, as shown later in this book, was the fact that the regime did not simply aim to prosecute acts of antisemitism, but it actively sought to mobilize thought, to deconstruct negative stereotypes, and to construct among its citizenry positive images of Jews. Finally, the state politicized the issue of attitudes toward Jews, forcing its citizens to choose between "socialist" and "counterrevolutionary" behaviors, each with corresponding consequences for the individual.

This is not to claim that antisemitism was completely defeated during this period. And Soviet nationality policies acquired new negative elements under Stalin's rule during the 1930s. Growing fear of disloyalty under conditions of a pending war in Europe led to ethnic cleansing and ethnic terror against nationalities with suspect cross-border ties. Nevertheless, throughout the interwar period the Soviet state actively suppressed antisemitism and managed to achieve a degree of integration of the Jewish population, and a degree of equality for Jews within society unprecedented in Russian history. Equally important, even Stalin's policy changes of the 1930s targeting "disloyalty" did not affect non-stigmatized nationalities, including Jews.[11] Eventually, the Soviet leadership would embark on its own antisemitic course, but this occurred later, in the postwar years. It would be wholly inaccurate to project the political antisemitism of the postwar period onto the earlier era.

Throughout the interwar period there is evidence of a strong political will on the part of the governing regime to achieve interethnic cooperation and societal integration, and government policies flowed from this political will. This book documents the results of those policies and demonstrates that they helped establish more positive interactions between Jews and Gentiles. Some Soviet citizens learned to curb their antisemitic impulses under the threat of punishment, while others assimilated the idea of Jews as equal fellow-citizens. This shift in relations, in turn, helps to explain the composed behavior of Transnistrians even after antisemitic Romanian forces replaced the Soviet authorities during World War II. While comparisons with Bessarabia are one way to judge the change that flowed from Soviet policies, it is also visible in a temporal comparison: the attitude shown in 1941 differed dramatically from the actions of Gentiles toward Jews in Transnistria during the Russian Civil War of 1918–1921.

Throughout the interwar years the Romanian state also pursued a modernization project, but one characterized by ethnic nationalism. In 1918, after acquiring new lands from the Russian and Austro-Hungarian Empires, the Romanian government launched a process of nation-building, widely supported by a variety of social groups and elites. The main goal was to ensure the dominance of ethnic Romanians within the geographically

[11] Terry Martin, "The Origins of Soviet Ethnic Cleansing," *Journal of Modern History* 70, no. 4 (1998): 816–17; Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

expanded Romanian state, and to replace existing elites within the newly acquired territories (including Russian, German, Hungarian, and Jewish) with "pure" Romanian elites. Despite the momentary glory of unification, serious tensions were caused by the incorporation of large minority populations – Hungarians, Russians, Germans, Jews – who were more urban, more educated, and more "modern" than most Romanians. State efforts to assimilate these into Romanian culture proved slow and difficult, moving Romanian leaders increasingly to embrace the idea of ethnic "purification," meaning the physical removal of minorities, either by population exchanges with neighboring countries (e.g., Bulgarians), or by unilateral "transfer" of minorities lacking a "homeland."[12]

In this context, antisemitism became a central element of nationalist ideology, while Jews became the archetypical "foreigners" within the "fatherland." Assimilated Jews in Romania's new territories were associated with the foreign powers from which these lands had been acquired, while the high-profile ethnic Jews in leadership positions within the short-lived Hungarian Communist government (1919) and in the Soviet Union, the latter two located on Romania's northern and eastern borders, were cited by Romanian elites as further proof of the dangers Jews posed as a group. Whether out of real concern or used instrumentally, the Romanian government claimed a fear of Communist incursion, and identified Jews – Bessarabian Jews in particular – as a "fifth column."

Despite the fact that the 1923 Romanian constitution granted legal equality, Jews remained second-class subjects, facing problems acquiring citizenship, and being barred from positions in the civil service, the upper echelons of the military, and institutions of higher learning.[13] Influential Romanian intellectuals, state officials, and political parties reinforced and adjusted old stereotypes about Jews to suit nationalistic discourse. Schools, universities, and other institutions were among the champions of Romanian nationalism, simultaneously inculcating xenophobia and antisemitism. Multiple economic and social grievances were re-channeled into a familiar, ethnically charged framework.

During this period, tensions suffused Jewish-Gentile relations, occasionally erupting into open violence. Encouraged by a condescending

[12] Vladimir Solonari, *Purifying the Nation: Population Exchange and Ethnic Cleansing in Nazi-Allied Romania* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), xvi.

[13] I.M. Kopanskii, "The Jews of Bassarabia," in *The History of the Jews in Romania*, vol. III: *Between the Two World Wars*, ed. Liviu Rotman and Raphael Vago (Tel Aviv: Goldstein-Goren Diaspora Research Center, 1996), 317-52.

attitude among officials and a permissive political and social environment, assaults on Jews occurred throughout the interwar period, growing ever more audacious and frequent towards the end of the 1930s. Beatings, intimidation of men and women, and brazen theft from Jewish shops all became more visible in a number of Bessarabian towns. The brief occupation of Bessarabia by the Soviet Union in 1940–1941 was not sufficient to produce any serious changes in most Gentiles' attitudes. Rather, the prewar antecedents of discrimination, other abuses, and increasing toleration of outright violence against Jews created a situation in which civilian violence against Jews became possible at the start of Romania's attack on the Soviet Union in 1941, an invasion aimed in large part to bring Bessarabia and Transnistria together under Romanian control.

In a broader sense, this analysis suggests that states command powerful tools for social construction, that they may use them to build and consolidate animosities, or that they may reshape interethnic relations by fostering cooperative relationships between previously estranged groups. The main instruments in this process of social transformation are a given state's policies on nationality, education, and culture, and a major determinant appears to be political will on the part of governing elites. Moreover, the present case study also demonstrates that improving relations between previously antagonistic groups can be accomplished in a relatively short period.

This book brings together areas of scholarship frequently separated from each other, and offers insights reaching far beyond the geographical borders of Bessarabia and Transnistria. First, it adds to the ongoing historical debate on the issue of popular participation in the Holocaust in Eastern Europe. Scholarly literature explains the violent outbursts against Jews primarily in the sense of existing prewar antisemitism and the impact of the 1939–1941 Soviet occupation of Eastern Poland, the Baltic States, and parts of Romania.[14] One of the most notable books in this field – Jan Gross' *Neighbors* – sent shock waves through public opinion in Poland by suggesting that the reasons for popular participation in killings should not be sought in Nazi orders or the Soviet occupation, but

[14] David Gaunt, Paul A. Levine, and Laura Palosuo, eds., *Collaboration and Resistance during the Holocaust: Belarus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004); Vladimir Solonari, "Patterns of Violence: The Local Population and the Mass Murder of Jews in Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina, July–August, 1941," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 8, no. 4 (Fall 2007): 749–87: Karel C. Berkhoff, *Harvest of Despair: Life and Death in Ukraine under Nazi Rule* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2004).

rather in the centuries-long tradition of Polish antisemitism.[15] Despite the power of Gross' argument, his approach presented antisemitism as a particular result of macro-historical processes with no discernible beginning and no clear end in sight.[16]

In contrast, this book, while agreeing that antisemitism was one of the main driving forces behind popular anti-Jewish behavior during World War II, offers a different understanding of the nature of that antisemitism. Its central argument advocates antisemitism's constructible character, and aims to demonstrate that animosity between Jews and non-Jews can either be transformed into acceptance through deliberate state integration and nationality policies, or perpetuated and aggravated by exclusionary policies and a divisive public discourse. Thus, it moves antisemitism from the timeless framework of longue-durée history and the hazy category of "ancient hatreds" into a more manageable unit of analysis, underlining the central role of the state and its institutions in ensuring its existence or encouraging its demise. Simultaneously, this approach contributes to the literature explaining ethnic violence, since such scholarship often points to "preexisting" ethnic polarization without theorizing how such polarization appears or changes.[17]

Equally important, this research taps into questions almost completely ignored in the existing literature: the degree to which the Soviet population internalized "progressive" values, and the degree to which attitudes changed as a result of socialization under a regime built on mass mobilization.[18] Jochen Hellbeck's study opened a path into a complex and ambiguous field, challenging the widespread popular habit of casting the Soviet regime solely as an oppressive power that strove to

[15] On the debate over *Neighbors*, see the discussion in *Slavic Review* 61, no. 3 (2002): 453–89; John Connelly, "Poles and Jews in the Second World War: The Revisions of Jan T. Gross," *Contemporary European History* 11, no. 4 (2002): 641–58; Antony Polonsky and Joanna B. Michlic, eds., *The Neighbors Respond: The Controversy over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 209–400; Marci Shore, "Conversing with Ghosts: Jedwabne, Żydokomuna, and Totalitarianism," *Kritika* 6, no. 2 (2005): 345–74.

[16] This is especially visible in Gross' reference to peasants' violence against Jews in the seventeenth century, described in Henryk Sienkiewicz' "Trilogy." See Gross, *Neighbors*, 122–25.

[17] Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Steven I. Wilkinson, *Votes and Violence: Electoral Competition and Ethnic Riots in India* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[18] David L. Hoffman evaluates the internalization of Stalinist cultural values by Party members in *Stalinist Values: The Cultural Norms of Soviet Modernity, 1917–1941* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003). See also Sarah Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia: Terror, Propaganda and Dissent, 1934–1941* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).