Complicity and Indifference in Eastern Europe under Nazi Rule

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REVIEW OF: Peter Black, Bela Rasky, and Marianne Windsperger, eds, *Collaboration in the Holocaust and World War II in Eastern Europe* (Wien/Hamburg: new academic press, 2019). 382 pp. ISBN 978-3-7003-2-0739.

While western Europeans have for some time been facing up to questions of complicity and collaboration with Nazi Germany, debates over collaboration in Eastern Europe have been far slower to surface. In part this had to do with the relative inaccessibility of archives and the hegemony of Soviet narratives of heroic communist resistance during the Cold War period. But in part it relates to the continuing significance of the Nazi past even in the post-1989 period. As the editors of this volume, Peter Black, Bela Rasky, and Marianne Windsperger, point out, with the collapse of communist rule, former anti-communist resistance activists were often celebrated as national heroes, overlooking the fact that many had been antisemitic fascists during the Nazi period. Moreover, the topic raises sensitive questions about far larger numbers of people. As Paul Schapiro points out in his opening remarks, 'bystanding' in face of collective violence is not neutral'.[1] Commenting that

> without willing, even eager collaborators, the degree to which the Nazis succeeded in their plan to exterminate the Jews of Europe never would have been possible and the multiple crimes committed against civilians of other European nationalities would also have been less severe,[2]

Schapiro asks whether the ordinary people who 'looked on' were in fact 'complicit in the crimes of the era in some way that we can recognize but have yet to adequately define'.[3]

Focussing on these issues, the volume brings together a range of contributions, by both established and junior scholars, including some

1   Paul Shapiro, 'Opening Remarks on Collaboration and Complicity: Speech held at the Opening of the Conference Collaboration in Eastern Europe during the Second World War and the Holocaust Jointly Organized by the VWI and the USHMM', in *Collaboration in the Holocaust and World War II in Eastern Europe*, ed. by Peter Black, Bela Rasky, and Marianne Windsperger (Wien/Hamburg: new academic press, 2019), pp. 17–20 (p. 17).

2   Ibid.

3   Ibid, p. 19.

still involved in doctoral research, on selected areas of eastern and south-eastern Europe. Some contributions focus primarily on institutions, parties or organisations; others explore popular responses or grass roots attitudes. The book is organised thematically, with some areas receiving fuller coverage than others. Geographically, Poland is particularly well covered, perhaps appropriately given the high proportion of Holocaust victims on Polish soil, while other regions gain only briefer coverage (and some are not discussed at all). The difficulties associated with uneven coverage will be exacerbated, for some readers, by the fact that contributions are in either English or German, with no summaries in the respective other language, making the whole volume only fully accessible to readers with good command of both languages. There is no general concluding chapter, leaving the reader to pull out common strands of inquiry, themes and questions.

There are three essays on perpetration in Poland. One of the editors, Peter Black, brings the fruits of more than thirty years' exhaustive research to provide what he nevertheless calls 'preliminary data and conclusions' about the so-called 'Trawniki-Men' or 'Foot Soldiers' of the 'Operation Reinhard' extermination camps.[4] Different aspects of collaboration are raised in the contributions by Tomasz Frydel on the Polish Blue Police in the Subcarpathian region, and by Leszek Gorycki and Sławomir Kapralsi on collaboration in the persecution of the Roma. Black takes a biographical approach, pointing out that the Trawniki men were not intrinsically antisemitic or anti-Soviet; most of them simply accommodated themselves to the murderous work that they were constrained to undertake, while a few deserted or committed suicide. Frydel argues that the behaviour of collaborators in the Blue Police was 'more situational than it was ideological'.[5] Recounting some powerful (and depressing) stories of wilful deception, he argues that members of the Blue Police could be men 'of two faces'[6]: they were very different from the 'dutiful functionaries who simply followed orders'[7] or the homogeneous vanguard groups who were ideologically driven, as variously identified in recent German

4 Peter Black, 'Who Were the Trawniki-Men? Preliminary Data and Conclusions about the Foot Soldiers of "Operation Reinhard"', in *Collaboration in the Holocaust and World War II in Eastern Europe*, ed. by Black, Rasky, and Windsperger, pp. 21–67.

5 Tom Frydel, 'Ordinary Men? The Polish Police and the Holocaust in the Subcarpathian Region', in *Collaboration in the Holocaust and World War II in Eastern Europe*, ed. by Black, Rasky, and Windsperger, pp. 69–126 (p. 73).

6 Ibid., p. 113.

7 Ibid, p. 118.

perpetrator research. Rather, their activities were determined largely by context, as they exercised constrained agency within a continually evolving situation. The significance of social relations within changing situational dynamics is similarly emphasised by Gorycki and Kapralsi, picking up on approaches to collaboration developed by Martin Dean and John Connolly. In particular, Gorycki and Kapralsi highlight the issue of 'social distance': close contacts and even intermarriage with members of persecuted groups – in their case studies, the Roma – could lead to greater likelihood of intervention or rescue attempts, while indifference to their fate was more conducive to 'structural collaboration' by members of the non-persecuted population. The three key factors affecting degrees and types of collaboration, in their view, are: 'the position of the collaborator in the network of relations'; the 'level of integration and range of social distance between different groups'; and 'the aims and intensity of German persecution'. These theses could well be applied on a broader scale.

War-time Croatia under the Ustaša regime is also well-served, with contributions on the persecution of the Jews by Filip Erdeljac, and the Roma by Danijel Vojak. Erdeljac makes interesting use of ego-documents, including letters and appeals to the authorities, to show how much Jewish Croats were committed to an independent Croatian state, felt themselves to be Croat nationalists, and appealed against discrimination in the newly introduced racial laws on the basis of their longstanding loyalty and commitment to the Croatian state. The Ustaša regime had not previously been strongly antisemitic, but the alliance with Germany from 1941 required the Ustaša to persecute Croatian Jews who had previously supported them and shared their anti-Serbian and nationalist agenda. Erdeljac highlights the 'genuine desire of many Croats from Jewish backgrounds to participate in the Croat national community'[8] – comparable in some ways, perhaps, to the commitment to German culture of many German Jews (although he does not point this out) – but who hit up against the new 'racial' redefinition of what it meant to be a member of a community that excluded 'non-Aryans'. The Roma in Croatia fared slightly better, as discussed in Vojak's contribution. Despite the Ustaša attempts to persecute Roma, there were many examples of non-Roma assisting and rescuing Roma victims, as a result of which some Roma survived. In different ways, both these

8   Filip Erdeljac, '"Also a Mother to us Jews": Jewish Croats in the Ustaša State', in *Collaboration in the Holocaust and World War II in Eastern Europe*, ed. by Black, Rasky, and Windsperger, pp. 223–244 (p. 242).

contributions help to undermine the emphasis in totalitarianism theories on how members of a repressed population were supposedly governed by fear, and they highlight rather the complex, cross-cutting, even self-contradictory, loyalties and motivations that determined people's attitudes and actions.

The significance of local social relations and views of the 'other' is explored too in T. Fielder Valone's analysis, based on eye-witness testimonies, of religious violence and collaboration in Lithuania during the fateful six months from June to December 1941. Highlighting the significance of Lithuania as a key site of transition to mass murder, he identifies spontaneous actions against Jews in rural areas of northwest Lithuania before there was any obvious German instigation of murderous racially-based violence against Jews. There were widespread incidents, including rituals of public humiliation and attacks on specifically Jewish symbols (destruction of Torah scrolls and religious books, cutting of beards), and symbolic 'conversions' by dunking in water as a mock 'baptism' rather than a means of drowning. Crowds were important in such rituals of exclusion, publicly portraying Jews as not being members of the community of common humanity and heightening 'the sense of distance between perpetrator and victim, citizen and non-citizen'.[9] But, in contrast to major urban areas like Vilnius and Kaunas, in rural areas there was a 'seeming absence of social discord during the two brief years of Soviet rule':[10] Jews here felt less afraid of the class-based persecution of communism than of Nazi anti-Jewish policies. What came together, however, were the murderous intentions of the Nazis and the religious antisemitism that had been previously whipped up through public rituals of humiliation and social exclusion. In rural areas, he concludes, 'homegrown, religious antisemitism, rather than politically motivated prejudice, played a substantive role in the escalation of violence', in light of which 'the leap from expulsion to mass murder does not appear so large'.[11]

Organizations and institutions, rather than social relations, are the primary focus of other contributions. Ivan Katchanovski notes that both the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) have been rehabilitated by the

9   T. Fielder Valone, 'Old Tensions, New Contexts: Religious Violence and Collaboration in Lithuania, June-December 1941', in *Collaboration in the Holocaust and World War II in Eastern Europe*, ed. by Black, Rasky, and Windsperger, pp. 245–264 (p. 255).

10   Ibid., p. 252.

11   Ibid., p. 260.

Ukrainian Institute of National Memory, and have been widely portrayed in the media as 'mass national liberation movement[s] that fought against both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union for Ukrainian independence', presenting 'the leaders of the OUN and UPA as national heroes'.[12] Even western scholars tended to ignore the participation of the OUN and UPA in mass murder: many former leaders had found refuge in the west, and some were used for intelligence operations against the Soviet Union in the Cold War.[13] Focussing specifically on Volhynia, Katchanovski demonstrates the roles played by the majority of the leaders of the OUN and the UPA, as well as 'very large proportions of their members',[14] in assisting the Nazi-led genocide in Ukraine, particularly in the earlier period of the war up to 1943. Even so, he suggests, further and more detailed research is needed.

In other areas, too, administrative assistance and local collaboration facilitated Nazi policies, often in interaction with existing traditions and prejudices that could be mobilised in new ways. Alfons Adams discusses the collaboration of the Czech police forces with Nazi persecution of Jews, Roma, and the 'work-shy' in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. Maria Kavala compares the course of the 'Final Solution' in Thessaloniki and Sofia, arguing that the Holocaust was 'facilitated by pre-existing ethnic and national tensions'.[15] Alexander Prusin reviews the Serbian administration's involvement in facilitating the Holocaust, tracing the ways in which both conservatives and revolutionaries who opposed liberalism, democracy and communism, could agree on antisemitism, which became 'a pillar of collaborationist ideology'.[16] Religious antisemitism became racist antisemitism, as Serbian administrative and police forces assisted in genocide; yet while some came to hate Jews, others were simply indifferent to their fate. Yannis Skalidakis sketches the role of local authorities in the destruction of the Jews in Crete, where Jews had

12 Ivan Katchanovski, 'The OUN, the UPA, and the Nazi Genocide in Ukraine', in *Collaboration in the Holocaust and World War II in Eastern Europe*, ed. by Black, Rasky, and Windsperger, pp. 177–204 (p. 177).

13 Ibid., p. 182.

14 Ibid., p. 202.

15 Maria Kavala, 'The "Final Solution" in Thessaloniki and in Sofia: A Comparison', in *Collaboration in the Holocaust and World War II in Eastern Europe*, ed. by Black, Rasky, and Windsperger, pp. 149–176 (p. 149).

16 Alexander Prusin, 'Collaboration Balkan Style: The Serbian Administration and the Holocaust', in *Collaboration in the Holocaust and World War II in Eastern Europe*, ed. by Black, Rasky, and Windsperger, pp. 205–221 (p. 213).

lived for more than two thousand years: they were well integrated, and had not been perceived as a threat; yet the local administration simply implemented Nazi policies, from which many also benefitted. Viktoria Silwanowitsch examines 'intellectual collaboration' by looking at the Nazi press in the occupied territories of the Soviet Union, with a case study of the newspaper *Novyj put'* – *Der neue Weg* [the 'new way'] in the Smolensk region and its impact on spreading antisemitism. The final section of the book, promisingly entitled 'coming to terms with collaboration', in fact contains two chapters on postwar trials of Nazi war crimes carried out under Soviet auspices. These chapters, by Iryna Sklokina and Tetiana Pastuschenko, provide intriguing and informative insights into this little-understood area, providing nuanced interpretations of Soviet justice in a Cold War context.

Most contributions locate their source material within the context of wider theoretical debates and approaches to specific victim groups. But there is little attempt to bring the different strands together within a wider framework of interpretation. Overall, the book implicitly raises two questions: first, the extent to which more research across the region is needed simply to 'know what happened' in specific areas where relatively little research has as yet been done; and secondly, the extent to which, on the basis of what is already known, we can begin to formulate more general hypotheses about the conditions under which particular forms of complicity, collaboration and involvement are more or less likely. Some chapters provide interesting pointers to the sort of wider framework that might be worked up, once the empirical groundwork has been more firmly laid. If there is a common thread to be discerned, it is that we need to pay more attention to changing local contexts and situational dynamics. 'Perpetrator research' will need to broaden its focus from direct perpetrators and their victims to the wider conditions under which people moved in one direction or another, empathised or aligned themselves with one group or another, and chose to act in different ways as circumstances changed.

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