

army headquarters about tending to these children who were hungry and crying, Field Marshall von Reichenau responded: he wrote a scathing critique of the disorderly approach to the killing action, asserting, “once such an action [against Jews] is started it should be carried out in an expedient manner.” Disorder and the jeopardizing of troop discipline were among his main concerns; later he would openly fume about the army’s role in stamping out “Judeo-Bolshevism.” But even before von Reichenau approved the massacre of the children, his subordinates in the Army and their S.S.-police counterparts had already planned the killing action (on the incident at Bila Tserkva, see Lower 2005b).



Figure 4. Map of Reich Commissariat Ukraine, 1 May 1942 (courtesy of U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, RG 53.002m, reel 4, 393-1-1).

[9] With the onset of the mass murder of entire Jewish communities in August 1941, the top officials governing the military and civilian zones – namely Commander of the Rear Military occupation zones in Ukraine, General von Roques, and Reich Commissar for the civilian administrated areas, Erich Koch – issued their own orders about how to handle the Jewish population. In August and September 1941, they addressed the policy of forming ghettos, which were now becoming “unnecessary” or “not very useful.” The Polish model of the Jewish ghetto was not replicated in Ukraine (see von Roques’ order of 28 August 1941). The registration of Jews and their property as well as marking them with the Star of David was routinely carried out. Judenräte (Jewish Councils) were formed, its members often killed right away, and new councils established again to help the Germans carry out preparatory steps leading to the mass shootings. Except for Jews in the western region of Galicia, Jews were not deported to camps in Poland to be gassed. Almost all Jews were killed in or near their hometowns. Neighbors witnessed the process, and many contributed to the violence, in pogroms. As many as 12,000 died in pogroms in western Ukraine, in and around the city of L’viv. Pogroms occurred, but were not as widespread in eastern Ukraine (Melamed; Friedman: 275-76; Klier and Lambrozo).



Figure 5. Massacre of Jews in Sdolbunov, Ukraine (courtesy of Yad Vashem).

[10] The expansion of the mass murder bought with it local conflicts about who was authorized to kill Jews, when the actions should occur, and how the killings should be carried out. These tensions were soon resolved by a combined effort of Nazi leaders who clarified the division of labor, and local commanders in the military and S.S. police who might have had mixed views about the policy, but at least shared a commitment to preserve order and not challenge the authority of

superiors. With each killing action regional officials in the army and S.S. police advanced their genocidal methods, even determining precisely the distance between the executioner and the victim, the position of the victim, facing away from the shooter, that mothers should carry their infants instead of separating women and children, and that forcing the Jews to remove their clothes beforehand would make the seizure and processing of their valuables more efficient. And lastly, they quickly realized that Ukrainians and local ethnic Germans could be relied upon to assist with the killing, and that few within the German administration would openly resist the mass murder. Key personnel in the military and S.S. police, such as General von Reichenau, Einsatzgruppen leaders Dr. Rasch, Paul Blobel, and S.S. Police General Friedrich Jeckeln formed a critical mass of perpetrators who honed their skills as killers and as “policy administrators.” Nowhere in Ukraine was this developing Nazi expertise in mass shootings as a killing process manifested to such a staggering degree than at Babi Yar.

[11] Between June and December 1941, the Germans and their collaborators murdered more than 350,000 Jews. In the subsequent years of Nazi rule, civilian administrators controlled the implementation of the “Final Solution” and developed more elaborate forms of administrative coordination. But it was Heinrich Himmler who set the deadlines. In August 1942 he told his top officials in Ukraine that the roughly 575,000 Jews who had survived the mass shootings and first deportations to Belzec in 1942 were now to be murdered, especially all the non-laboring Jews.² Hundreds of rural ghettos in Volhynia were gone by mid-November 1942. A second wave of deportations to Belzec from Galicia began in September and ghettos were liquidated in eastern Galicia in 1943 (on the history of the ghettos, see Lower 2006; Spector). Very few survived German captivity in the labor camps, working in such projects as the construction of a new autobahn. Those who were hidden or who fled to the forests had the greatest chance of survival.³

[12] The Holocaust was implemented region by region down to the smallest localities. But the decentralization of the “Final Solution” policy did not result in administrative chaos. On the contrary, ad hoc collaboration at the district level demonstrated the totality of what scholar Raul Hilberg coined the “machinery of destruction” (263, 266). The Gestapo security police outposts in Ukraine were few and far between. In the smallest of the gendarme police stations, in rural towns such as Ruzhyn, there were 2-3 German officers supported by twenty five Ukrainian and ethnic German policemen responsible for covering 1800 square kilometers and policing 189,000 inhabitants. But staff shortages did not slow the killing process or obstruct the Germans ability to hunt down every last Jew (on the Ruzhyn police and the Holocaust, see Lower 2005a: 132-33, 139, 192). Many officials in non-police functions stepped forward to help, or were pressured to do so; similarly, the local population

² The meetings were documented in Himmler’s appointment book, but the remark about the final liquidations of Jewish camps and ghettos was related after the war by S.S. men who attended the meetings and subsequent wartime orders by the commissars that referenced such decisions. See Witte, *et al.*: 509-12. For the figures on Galician Jews deported to Belzec, see Pohl.

³ According to Yad Vashem’s statistics and research, 2,185 Ukrainians have been recognized as the Righteous Among the Nations for their rescue of Jews during the Holocaust. See the collection of Jewish survivor testimony from Ukraine in Zabarko.

of largely Ukrainians complied, though unlike the German officials in the region, they were threatened with death and some were killed for helping Jews. Like the Berlin-centered-bureaucrats in Hilberg's analysis, the German functionaries in Ukraine displayed "a striking pathfinding ability in the absence of directives . . . a fundamental comprehension of the task even when there were not explicit communications" (993).

[13] Thus the Nazi implementation of the "Final Solution" was an ongoing invention of central and peripheral leaders. Berlin established the aims and administrative framework. The process of mass murder developed from the ground up, often after "on the spot" decision making that included a mix of German officials and professionals who tried to perfect the killing methods. Most of the regional German functionaries who carried out the killing and managed the so called Jewish question in their respective districts were university degreed, middle ranking bureaucrats and Nazi ideologues who suddenly found themselves in positions of extreme power. The shooting commandos were staffed with men in their thirties, mostly married with children, many with law degrees. When a regional administrator, such as Commissar Kurt Klemm in Zhytomyr, declared his district "*judenfrei*" in the summer of 1942, he also sought approbation from his superiors for a job "well done." Those who felt uneasy about the massacres found ways to adapt to the genocide. One could silently acquiesce, look the other way, nod in approval, or find others to do the most gruesome task such as killing children, which for most had become a statistical "detail" not to be recorded in the war diaries and other official documents (testimony of Dr. Consee).

German Colonization of Ukraine

[14] What does colonialism have to do with the Holocaust? The Nazi implementation of the genocide occurred mainly in territories slated for colonization, or as Himmler put it, Germanization. There is a relationship between the ideas and dynamic of Nazi empire building and the Holocaust, but what is this relationship exactly? A key concept for understanding the link is the German notion of *Lebensraum*, or living space. The German demand for more territory was not Hitler's idea. It was a movement from the nineteenth century that developed alongside the growth of German nationalism and the Kaiser's empire overseas. Radical pan-Germanists and expansionists who touted the ineluctable *Drang nach Osten* legitimized their territorial claims with historical references to the Hanseatic League and other German colonial migrations to Eastern Europe, such as the colonies of Black Sea and Volga Germans in southern Ukraine. In these parts, such ideologues and agitators claimed, German settlers retained their "Germanness," unlike the millions who immigrated to America and assimilated into the "melting pot." During the Nazi era, the German colonizing mission concept took on a rigid racialist meaning, which owed much to the European experience in Africa. The desired territory in Eastern Europe appeared in Nazi thinking as a "tabula rasa." The "natives" who inhabited it (Slavs and Jews) had corrupted, destroyed the territory. It was destined to become living space for Aryans or Germans only. Jews specifically had no future in this space. Thus inherently wrapped up in Nazi expansionism were exclusionary, potentially genocidal, population policies that assumed certain "inferior races" or biological threats would be removed or disappear. The core of Nazi imperialism was a revolution in the ethnic or racial makeup of Eastern Europe. The

dynamism that drove this revolution was an intense fear and hatred of Jews and Bolshevism, and the Germans were not the only non-Jews in Europe to act on these sentiments.

[15] But scholars of Nazi imperialism and scholars of the Holocaust have not connected the two histories and analyzed them in depth. In the 1950s, Raphael Lemkin, the Polish Jewish lawyer and political scientist who coined the term genocide began to study the historical relationship between imperialism and genocide, but his manuscript on this topic was not published. Hannah Arendt, drawing from Lemkin's work dealt with the theme briefly in her work, *Origins of Totalitarianism* (see 123-25). More recently, German historian Götz Aly linked the Nazi implementation of the "Final Solution" to the resettlement of ethnic Germans (Volksdeutschen) in Poland (1999).⁴ What is coming to light is that that the Nazi war against the Jews was an integral part, indeed a central dynamic, in the German attempt at empire-building in Europe. Nazi rule in the east cannot be understood strictly as the mechanisms of an occupation administration, but must be placed within a broader ideological context of the imperial dreams that motivated the conquest from the start.

[16] In Hitler's monologues and the writings of Heinrich Himmler and Alfred Rosenberg, the Reich Minister for the Occupied Eastern Territories, one finds references to the North American frontier, the British Empire in India, and the European exploitation of Africa (on the U.S. connections to German imperialist thinking, see Steinweis). Already in *Mein Kampf*, Hitler set the tone: "We national socialists consciously draw a line beneath the foreign policy of our pre-War period. We take up where we broke off six hundred years ago. We stop the endless German movement to the south and west, and turn our gaze to the east. At long last we break off the colonial and commercial policy of the pre-War period and shift to the soil policy of the future" (1971: 654). In the euphoria of victory of July 1941, as historian Christopher Browning put it, Hitler waxed about his colonial schemes for Ukraine. He called the territory a future "Garden of Eden" (see Bormann), while stressing that the "natives," "Ukrainian negroes," and other inferior races, especially the Jews, will be removed: "the Jew that destroyer we shall drive out . . . our colonizing penetration must be constantly progressive until it reached the stage where own colonies far outnumber the local inhabitants" (Hitler 2000: 68). Likewise, Himmler described Eastern Europe as Germany's Californian paradise, its Manifest Destiny. Rosenberg sent his regional commissars in Ukraine a reading list that included titles such as "With my Backpack to India," "In the African Jungle," alongside "The Jewish World Plague." A popular family board game at the time promoted armed German farmers and pioneers competing for the fertile Black Earth of the Ukraine.⁵

[17] In my book *Nazi Empire Building and the Holocaust in Ukraine*, I argue that Nazi leaders derived many of their colonialist ambitions from European models, but the Nazi take over

⁴ It should be noted that Arendt's argument about the link between European New Imperialism and the totalitarian state was flawed by the fact that that imperial models she referenced were neither German nor Russian, and Britain (her imperial model) did not establish a totalitarian state. Further, she stressed the growth of a modern administration and racism in European imperial history, but not the pattern of genocidal policies.

⁵ See Zhytomyr Commissar's memo about books offered by the Nazi Party to the staff, dated 27 February 1942, Zhytomyr State Archives, Ukraine, P-1151c-1-21 and Nazi Party list of books in local library, P-1151-1-104. See also Aly 2003, 2007.

of Ukraine was unprecedented in its application of violence, racism, anti-Semitism, and militarism. Nazi leaders embarked on a new imperialist vision for Europe that was more revolutionary and racist than the old “Mitteleuropa” dreams of their forefathers. Hence, Himmler would argue that the Nazi approach to colonizing Europe centered on Germanization or Aryanization. This was, as Himmler stated, “not in the old sense of bringing the German language and German laws to the people dwelling in that area, but to ensure that in the east only people of genuinely German, Teutonic blood shall live” (Lemkin: 21).

[18] If leaders in Berlin were determined to realize such imperialist, racist, and anti-Semitic ambitions in Eastern Europe, did their functionaries share a similar world view, did they embrace these ideas and experiments in empire building? I would argue not entirely. The caste of Nazi adventurers who ravaged Ukraine from 1941 to 1944 had proven themselves as S.A. old fighters in the 1920s; some were fresh graduates of the Nazi finishing schools, the Castle of the Order. Here they learned that their role in Ukraine was a natural extension of Europe’s history of conquest and rule; they prided themselves on being revolutionaries with a new, utopian vision of an Aryan dominated Europe. Ultimately, however, the exigencies of the war effort and mounting partisan warfare in the civilian zones where they governed prevented German leaders from realizing their colonial dreams. Once placed in their roles as imperial masters, they failed to construct a functioning, efficient system of rule. Most resorted to pure terror and violence to maintain some control over the territory and its peoples. Yet even in the relatively short time in which German administrators were present in Ukraine, they tested out some experimental resettlement schemes. These “laboratories” of Nazi colonialism proved disastrous.

[19] One such scheme, a little known colonial experiment, was tested out in a secured zone between Hitler and Himmler’s headquarters in Ukraine, near Zhytomyr. In autumn 1942, after the territory had been cleared of all Jews, over 10,000 ethnic Germans were concentrated in the area in a colony called Hegewald or preservation forest. The area was administered by the S.S.-police. Ukrainians who had resided there were deported to labor camps or to the Reich, or forced to work for their new masters on the farms. In addition to dozens of kindergarten, vocational training, ideological and political indoctrination programs, and S.S.-police-led exercises, Himmler and his top advisors introduced new models in farming, drawing from German’s imperial past in Africa. The Togo Ost Society was established in Zhytomyr at the end of 1942 (see Lower 2005a: 162-79).

[20] And yet the formation of Hegewald and other experimental colonies in Ukraine and Poland did not go as smoothly as Nazi leaders had expected. The Nazis were unable to



Figure 6. Wartime German Film Footage of the Volksdeutsche Colony Halbstadt, Nazi Occupied Ukraine (courtesy of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum Film Archive, Bundesarchiv/Transit Film GmbH)

construct colonies based on their pseudo-scientific notion of race. Many of the contradictions that lay beneath Hitler and Himmler's fantasies of an Aryan living space reviewed themselves at the local level of practice. Ethnic Germans who had grown up under the Stalinist system were impoverished, few spoke German, and they lacked the skills that Germans needed to construct their new empire. The Germans had killed most of the skilled laborers in the region, namely, the Jews. Ukrainians, realizing that their own future was not bright under the Germans, worked begrudgingly for the Germans, and increasingly engaged in sabotage and resistance activities. Within the German administration itself, the same regional commissars and S.S.-policemen who rarely questioned the eradication of those deemed inferior, remained uncertain, skeptical, and less enthusiastic about their role in the so-called Aryan utopia. The realities of the war of destruction were far from Hitler's fantasy of a Garden of Eden. With the increasing partisan attacks against German settlers and administrative offices, Himmler and other leaders found that they needed to make trips to the field to reassure subordinates to stay the course. Even Hitler realized that ordinary Germans did not share his appreciation for colonies and his vision of a Germanized Russia. The task of his generation, as Hitler explained it, was to instill in younger Germans a feeling of pride as settlers and pioneers in the East; there they will be expected to "build up something truly magnificent" (monologue of 8-11 August 1941; 2000: 24); "the German colonist ought to live on spacious farms, the governors in Palaces, what India was for England, the territories of Russia will be for us. If only I could make the German people understand what this space means for our future . . . Europe is not a geographic entity, it is a racial entity" (monologue of 17 September 1941; 2000: 34). Mounting military defeats and the unraveling of Nazi rule on the new frontier illuminated the fact that the Nazi attempt at empire building was morally and intellectually bankrupt, and in the context of a protracted war of destruction not feasible.

[21] German leaders were only able to carry out the first step in their larger plan of Germanizing Europe – the destruction of the Jews. For this they benefited from the widespread support of their subordinates in the field and the participation or indifference of the indigenous peoples in their empire.

Concluding Remarks

[22] Hitler's war against the Jews in Ukraine was indeed a multi-pronged campaign. Its force drew from centuries of European anti-Semitism, but other historical trajectories are evident. Hitler combined war and empire-building with a people's revolution, a restructuring and reordering of society based upon a radically utopian ideology. Hitler and Himmler sought their place in history, comparing themselves to the "Great" imperialists and noting the unchecked atrocities committed by Genghis Khan, Cortez, and Napoleon. They placed themselves within this pantheon of global "supermen" (really a rogues gallery of warriors). Unique to the dynamic of the Nazi's racial, imperial war in Europe was the so called Jewish threat and the scope and methods Nazi leaders applied to vanquish this so called enemy, that is innocent men women and children who were tragically the most vulnerable minority in Europe.

[23] Berlin and Babi Yar may have been 750 miles apart but in many respects they were very close. The core beliefs, practices, and aims of Hitler's Germany were ultimately realized in

the eastern stretches of its empire not in its capital city of Berlin. Nazi leaders were not removed from events, sitting behind their desks in Berlin. They were actively promoting their most radical policies in the field. Regional functionaries in Ukraine often acted independently, devising new methods of persecution, putting their own personal stamp on the terror, or even slowing the killing process by secretly retaining Jewish laborers. Still Nazi leaders, whether physically present or indirectly involved, shaped events at the local level to a far greater extent than one might otherwise assume given the vastness of the occupied territory. Nazi leaders empowered local leaders to hunt down and kill Jews without bureaucratic and legal restraints. They communicated this aim clearly in writing and verbally. Nazi leader placed their most loyal henchmen in key positions of power to lord over the rest. Above and beyond their direct orders and physical presence, the core of the Nazi leadership shaped the Holocaust in Ukraine in less tangible ways. At a psychological level, local regional S.S.-police and civilian governors were motivated to diligently carry out their duties without questioning authority and to work towards their superiors, what Germans refer to as “anticipatory obedience.” Once the murder of Jews was sanctioned by the state, regional officials carried it out without explicit instructions. The resulting climate was one of silent mutual agreement that bridged the spatial divide between the center and periphery.

[24] Without Berlin there would not have been Babi Yar, and in many ways Babi Yar also defined Berlin. By demonstrating to the leadership that genocide was possible, Babi Yar emboldened Nazi leaders to expand their war against the Jews in Ukraine to all of Europe and beyond. The dynamism of the two, the central driving forces of the leadership and the expressed willingness of subordinates to carry out the murder, as well as the local “resourcefulness” of the lower level functionaries and collaborators – all of this was necessary for the Holocaust to happen. It did not take modernity as such; the mass shooting pits were a form of systematic murder and there was a division of labor, but nothing like the industrial factory style gassing in Poland.

[25] The Shoah was in its scope and methods the most extreme genocidal policy of the Reich, and arguably the defining feature of Nazi conquest and rule. When we think of the legacy of the Third Reich, when we ask whether Hitler, like other historic conquerors, left anything of any value in the places his regime controlled, to that question I reply that the legacy of Hitler’s empire in Europe is Babi Yar, as well as Auschwitz, Treblinka, Sobibor, Belzec, Maly Trostinets near Minsk, the Ninth Fort near Kovno, the Rumbuli Forest near Riga, and the tens of thousands of mass murder sites and labor camps that covered the map of Europe during the Second World War, scar the landscape today, and haunt our historical memory. These sites were and continue to be the topography of terror that we associate with Nazism, and for too long Ukraine’s prominent place in this landscape has been ignored or underappreciated.

[26] So what lessons can we draw from this history today? Humans may very well be a violent species, but are we programmed to be genocidal warriors and mass murderers? Our future could be different, and we could learn from the horrors of the Second World War. As was clear in Nazi occupied Ukraine and elsewhere and oft times in our history, humans will carry out the most heinous violent acts when they become obsessed, convinced of an idea, and we see in the Nazi campaign in Ukraine, the tragic power of an idea steeped in imperial,

nationalist arrogance and driven by a racist, and specifically in this case anti-Semitic fear and hatred.

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