

BERNHARD CHIARI, *How patriotic was the great patriotic war? : new perspectives on the history of the Second World War in Belarus*, in «Annali dell'Istituto storico italo-germanico in Trento» (ISSN: 0392-0011), 28 (2002), pp. 509-527.

Url: <https://heyjoe.fbk.eu/index.php/anisig>

Questo articolo è stato digitalizzato dal progetto ASTRA - *Archivio della storiografia trentina*, grazie al finanziamento della Fondazione Caritro (Bando Archivi 2021). ASTRA è un progetto della Biblioteca Fondazione Bruno Kessler, in collaborazione con Accademia Roveretana degli Agiati, Fondazione Museo storico del Trentino, FBK-Istituto Storico Italo-Germanico, Museo Storico Italiano della Guerra (Rovereto), e Società di Studi Trentini di Scienze Storiche. ASTRA rende disponibili le versioni elettroniche delle maggiori riviste storiche del Trentino, all'interno del portale [HeyJoe](#) - *History, Religion and Philosophy Journals Online Access*.

This article has been digitised within the project ASTRA - *Archivio della storiografia trentina* through the generous support of Fondazione Caritro (Bando Archivi 2021). ASTRA is a Bruno Kessler Foundation Library project, run jointly with Accademia Roveretana degli Agiati, Fondazione Museo storico del Trentino, FBK-Italian-German Historical Institute, the Italian War History Museum (Rovereto), and Società di Studi Trentini di Scienze Storiche. ASTRA aims to make the most important journals of (and on) the Trentino area available in a free-to-access online space on the [HeyJoe](#) - *History, Religion and Philosophy Journals Online Access* platform.

## Nota copyright

Tutto il materiale contenuto nel sito [HeyJoe](#), compreso il presente PDF, è rilasciato sotto licenza [Creative Commons](#) Attribuzione–Non commerciale–Non opere derivate 4.0 Internazionale. Pertanto è possibile liberamente scaricare, stampare, fotocopiare e distribuire questo articolo e gli altri presenti nel sito, purché si attribuisca in maniera corretta la paternità dell’opera, non la si utilizzi per fini commerciali e non la si trasformi o modifichi.

## Copyright notice

All materials on the [HeyJoe](#) website, including the present PDF file, are made available under a [Creative Commons](#) Attribution–NonCommercial–NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. You are free to download, print, copy, and share this file and any other on this website, as long as you give appropriate credit. You may not use this material for commercial purposes. If you remix, transform, or build upon the material, you may not distribute the modified material.



# How Patriotic was the Great Patriotic War?

New Perspectives on the History of the Second World War in Belarus

by *Bernhard Chiari*

## 1. Introduction

On November 27, 2001, the new exhibition of the Institut für Sozialforschung in Hamburg on «War Crimes of the German Wehrmacht in the East», was opened in Berlin. The public was confronted with the results of a completely new research project carried out by a number of young historians. Bogdan Musial (Warsaw) and Krisztián Ungváry (Budapest) had discovered that many errors (documentation of photos) had been made by the organizers of the first Wehrmacht exhibition in the mid-nineties<sup>1</sup>. Besides Jan Philipp Reemtsma, Head of the Hamburg Institut für Sozialforschung, Minister of State Nida-Rümelin as well as Hans Mommsen, Head of the Advisory Board, spoke on November 27. The scholarly introduction was made by Hans-Erich Volkmann, chief historian of the Armed Forces Historical Research Office in Potsdam<sup>2</sup>.

The event in Berlin illustrates the importance of World War Two for contemporary Germany. In the last few years, no other debate on historic events has provoked such emotional reactions as the Wehrmacht exhibition. The major thesis of this exhibition is not a new one. In comparison to other war theatres, the Wehrmacht fought a war of extermination (*Vernichtungskrieg*) in the East and took part in the annihilation of Soviet and East European Jews.

From a «legalistic approach», *Unternehmen Barbarossa* and the German Rule in the Soviet Union violated the Convention of the Hague in many

<sup>1</sup> HAMBURGER INSTITUT FÜR SOZIALFORSCHUNG (ed), *Verbrechen der Wehrmacht. Dimensionen des Vernichtungskrieges 1941-1944*, Hamburg 2002.

<sup>2</sup> H.-E. VOLKMANN, «Vergessen prägt unser Dasein». *Rede zur Eröffnung der Ausstellung Verbrechen der Wehrmacht. Dimensionen des Vernichtungskrieges 1941-1944*, in «Militärgeschichtliche Zeitschrift», 60, 2001, pp. 501-508.

ways<sup>3</sup>. The occupation power abandoned the ground of international law and dealt with the *slawische Untermensch* following the rules of National Socialist *Rassenideologie*. It is symptomatic that neither a Ukrainian nor a Belorussian Government played any significant role during the war<sup>4</sup>.

The public in Germany reacted not only to the shocking pictures of the war crimes and the Holocaust but also to the portrayal of the Wehrmacht as a whole in the exhibition, which did not show any significant regional or individual deviation from the norm. As a result, the new exhibition won't lead to simple answers and facile short formulas that could explain World War Two in the East and close this chapter. In this way the Hamburg Institute has proved to be worthy of *critique* in the best sense<sup>5</sup>.

The Belorussian example will be discussed here in the context of common structures and typologies of local government in World War Two. In the last few years, there has been a continuous discussion about this war and its implications for post-war societies, their political and intellectual cultures in (former) West and East Germany, as well as for the new unified Germany. This *milieu* has encouraged scholarly research on various aspects of the War in the East. We are well-informed about the genesis of Nazi Germany's so called final solution to the Jewish problem (*Endlösung der Judenfrage*), and we know a lot about the military and political plans as well as the economic structures of German-occupied territories in the East. The material results of war and destruction are obvious<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> C. STREIT, *Keine Kameraden. Die Wehrmacht und die sowjetischen Kriegsgefangenen 1941-45*, Bonn 1997<sup>2</sup>; H. HEER - K. NAUMANN (eds), *Vernichtungskrieg. Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941-1944*, Hamburg 1995.

<sup>4</sup> A.K. SOLOV'EV, *Belorusskaja Central'naja Rada. Sozdanie, dejatel'nost, krach*, Minsk 1995 (transliteration of Russian and Belorussian terms in the text and in the footnotes follows the German system); D. POHL, *Die Ukraine im Zweiten Weltkrieg*, in P. JORDAN u.a. (edd), *Ukraine. Geographie – Ethnische Struktur – Geschichte – Sprache und Literatur – Kultur – Politik – Bildung – Wirtschaft – Recht* (Osthefte, Sonderband 15. Reihe zu «Österreichische Osthefte»), Frankfurt a.M. u.a. 2001, pp. 339-362.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, the journal «zeitgeschichte», 2, 2002 (special edition, Wehrmachtausstellung/en im Diskurs).

<sup>6</sup> See C. GERLACH, «Militärische Versorgungszwänge», *Besatzungspolitik und Massenverbrechen: Die Rolle des Generalquartiermeisters des Heeres und seiner Dienststellen im Krieg gegen die Sowjetunion*, in N. FREI - S. STEINBACHER - B.C. WAGNER (eds), *Ausbeutung, Vernichtung, Öffentlichkeit. Neue Studien zur nationalsozialistischen Lagerpolitik*, München 2000, pp. 175-208; J. FÖRSTER, *Das Unternehmen «Barbarossa» als Eroberungs- und Vernichtungskrieg*, in *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg*, 10 vols, Stuttgart 1979 f., vol. 4: H. BOOG - J. FÖRSTER - J. HOFFMANN (eds), *Der Angriff auf die Sowjetunion*, Stuttgart 1983, pp. 413-450; K. PÄTZOLD - E. SCHWARZ, *Tagesordnung: Judenmord. Die*

In the Soviet Union and its successor states, libraries were filled with hymns to the Great Patriotic War, the *Bol'shaja Otečestvennaja vojna*<sup>7</sup>. It remains to be seen whether the Socialist monument to this war has been destroyed or modified during the last decade<sup>8</sup>. Two points are of central importance in this context. Firstly, in Belorussia there was no war of a Soviet people against fascism, starting in 1941. Only after one year did the Soviet partisan movement with its leadership in Moscow gain the strength and the logistical and military means to fight the German occupation regime in a significant way. In the chaos of the first weeks of the war, when the Red Army was practically defeated and left hundreds of thousands of POWs, German police had to deal with small groups of stragglers, who tried to reach their home villages, refugees from the fast moving front, plunderers and criminals from Soviet jails, Soviet officials on the run, and many inhabitants (especially Poles, but also Belorussians, and in some cases even Jews) who welcomed the German troops and expected conditions as they had been under German occupation in World War One<sup>9</sup>. Second, the myth of Soviet partisan movement, which seemed almost identical with the population of the BSSR in Soviet post-war historiography, is still alive in today's Republic of Belarus. Only first steps have been made to displace the monuments of Soviet remembrance by putting the occupied society into a historical perspective<sup>10</sup>.

*Wannsee-Konferenz am 20.1.1942. Eine Dokumentation zur Organisation der Endlösung*, Berlin 1992; K.-M. MALLMANN, *Die Türöffner der «Endlösung»*. Zur Genesis des Genozid, in G. PAUL - K.-M. MALLMANN (eds), *Die Gestapo im Zweiten Weltkrieg. «Heimatfront» und besetztes Europa*, Darmstadt 2000, pp. 437-463; U. HERBERT (ed), *Nationalsozialistische Vernichtungspolitik 1939-1945. Neue Forschungen und Kontroversen*, Frankfurt a.M. 1998; M. RÖSSLER - S. SCHLEIERMACHER (eds), *Der «Generalplan Ost»*. Hauptlinien der nationalsozialistischen Planungs- und Vernichtungspolitik, Berlin 1993.

<sup>7</sup> S.J. LINZ (ed), *The Impact of World War II on the Soviet Union*, Totowa NJ 1985; N. TUMARKIN, *The Living and the Dead. The Rise and Fall of the Cult of World War II in Russia*, New York 1994.

<sup>8</sup> See B. BONWETSCH, «Ich habe an einem völlig anderen Krieg teilgenommen». Die Erinnerung an den «Großen Vaterländischen Krieg» in der Sowjetunion, in H. BERDING - K. HELLER - W. SPEITKAMP (edd), *Krieg und Erinnerung. Fallstudien zum 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, Göttingen 2000, pp. 149-151; E. ZUBKOVA, *Poslevoennoe sovetskoe obščestvo: politika i pousednevnost' 1945-1953*, Moskva 2000.

<sup>9</sup> B. CHIARI, *Geschichte als Gewalttat. Weißrußland als Kind zweier Weltkriege*, in B. THOSS - H.-E. VOLKMANN (eds), *Erster Weltkrieg – Zweiter Weltkrieg. Ein Vergleich. Krieg, Kriegserlebnis, Kriegserfahrung in Deutschland*, Paderborn 2002, pp. 615-631.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, the recent publication by B. SOKOLOV, *Okkupacija. Pravda i mify*, Moskva 2002. Sokolov, who has decided to print his book without annotations, deals with

We do not yet know very much about how the occupied societies lived during the war years. Despite the occupation, everyday life went on, even in the face of almost unbelievable German atrocities and terror. There was room for individual decision-making, and there were individuals who took their chance and who were not corrupted by a criminal leadership. Others tried to profit from the new German order. In this context, besides the role of indigenous police, co-operation between occupation authorities and the local indigenous administration, and national or ethnic conflicts represent areas of special interest. Collaboration (better 'interaction') between individuals and groups, and the German administration apparatus lead to the almost total destruction of the Belorussian society<sup>11</sup>.

## 2. Historical background of a multiethnic region

The region known as Belarus is made up of various areas with different cultural, ethnic and religious compositions where a substantial number of languages and dialects are spoken. After World War One, the Belorussian Soviet Republic (BSSR) consisted of the area around Minsk, to which the districts of Mogilev and Gomel' were added in 1924 and 1926. The make-up of the population was reflected in the adoption of four official languages (Belorussian, Yiddish, Russian, and Polish). The rural population of Belarus that could hardly be defined by any national criteria was not given a written language that served all technical and literary purposes until the Soviet system of schools, universities, and the Minsk branch of the Academy of Sciences were founded. In education as well as in various economic fields, the Jewish intelligentsia played a key role.

the Soviet myths in a very open-minded and stimulating way; also A. LITVIN, *Akupacyja Belarusi (1941-1944): prablemy supracivu i kalabaracyi*, Minsk 2000. For a more conservative position see 55 gadoŭ Peramogi ũ Vjalikaj Ajčynnaj vajne: pogljad praz gady, novyja koncepcy i padychody. Materyjaly navukova-tearetyčnaj kanferencyi 4-5 maja 2000 goda, č 1 i 2, Minsk 2001.

<sup>11</sup> See B. CHIARI, *Alltag hinter Front. Besatzung, Kollaboration und Widerstand in Weißrußland 1941-1944*, Düsseldorf 1998. This project was based on Documents from Belorussian and Russian archives, the German Federal Archive, as well as on Soviet trial records which the Prosecutor's Office of Belarus made available to the London Metropolitan Police in accordance with an international agreement. See also B. CHIARI (ed), *Die polnische Heimatarmee. Geschichte und Mythos der Armia Krajowa seit dem Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Beiträge zur Militärgeschichte, 57), München 2003; BUNDESARCHIV (ed), *Europa unterm Hakenkreuz. Die Okkupationspolitik des deutschen Faschismus (1938-1945)*, Berlin - Heidelberg 1988-1996, vol. 7 (suppl. 1): *Okkupation und Kollaboration (1938-1945). Beiträge zu Konzepten und Praxis der Kollaboration in der deutschen Okkupationspolitik*, Heidelberg 1994.

Soviet Belarus was not only the heiress of a Polish minority in Czarist Russia, but also of the complex multi-ethnic structures in the Empire's Pale of Settlement. The status of Poles in the BSSR, after some years of cultural *laissez faire* as a result of a liberal cultural policy, was increasingly marked by official Soviet mistrust of all national minorities. From the very beginning, the Russians played an important role in the state machinery. The Polish element was disproportionately affected by several waves of arrests and deportations during the thirties. Approximately half a million Poles fell victim to Stalinist terror<sup>12</sup>.

The eastern border regions of Poland (Kresy Wschodnie) that, since the Peace of Riga in 1921, included the voivodeships (counties) of Vilnius, Novogrodek, Polesia, and Volhynia, as well as the Bialystok district were underdeveloped and peripheral. As far as the economy was concerned, the Kresy were the poorhouses of Poland between the wars, with the peasantry making up more than 80% of the population. In 1931, illiteracy stood at 30%. Although Polish bureaucrats hoped that the Belorussians would be assimilated into the Polish population once their alphabet was latinized, the minority question (concerning Belorussians as well as Jews, Ukrainians, and Lithuanians) remained unsolved in 1939<sup>13</sup>.

Prior to 1939, Belarus was part of two systems that – politically and culturally – were hardly comparable. Soviet historiography portrays the BSSR as the principal pillar in the «people's war against fascism»<sup>14</sup>. But more than half of Belorussian territory was not even incorporated until the signing of the Hitler-Stalin Pact. This, for example, includes the cities of Baranoviči, Grodno, Brest, Lida, Slonim, and Molodečno. As a result of the 'reunification' or annexation of 1939, not only the area but also the population of Belarus doubled in size. A new polity emerged with a new kind of society. Out of a total population of 4,125,000 persons in the

<sup>12</sup> B. CHIARI, «Nationale Renaissance», *Belorussifizierung und Sowjetisierung: Erziehungs- und Bildungspolitik in Weißrußland 1922-1944*, in «Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas», NF, 42, 1994, 4, pp. 521-540.

<sup>13</sup> D. BEYRAU, *Schlachtfeld der Diktatoren. Osteuropa im Schatten von Hitler und Stalin*, Göttingen 2000; W. BENECKE, *Die Ostgebiete der Zweiten Polnischen Republik. Staatsmacht und öffentliche Ordnung in einer Minderheitenregion 1918-1939*, Köln - Weimar - Wien 1999; see also various papers in D. BEYRAU - R. LINDNER (eds), *Handbuch der Geschichte Weißrußlands*, Göttingen 2001, and R. LINDNER, *Weißrußland (Belarus)*, in T.M. BOHN - D. NEUTATZ (eds), *Studienhandbuch östliches Europa*, vol. 2: *Geschichte des russischen Reiches und der Sowjetunion*, Köln 2002, pp. 336-342.

<sup>14</sup> P.K. PONOMARENKO, *Vsenarodnaja bor'ba v tylu nemecko-fašistskich zachvatčikov 1941-1944*, Moskva 1986.

annexed regions of Belarus in 1939, approximately 48% (1,900,000) were Belorussians, 36% (1,485,000) Poles and some 9% (388,000) Jews. In the areas occupied by the Red Army in 1939, Poles dominated the government as landlords or as farmers<sup>15</sup>.

### 3. *Sovietization after September 1939*

When units of the Red Army crossed the border to Poland on September 17, 1939, fighting broke out not only between Soviet troops and a small number of Polish reserve forces but also between Soviet troops and Polish, Belorussian, and Ukrainian militias. In the wake of the Red Army, units of the NKVD began tracking down and liquidating «anti-Soviet elements». However, Polish partisans were still attacking Soviet military patrols in 1940. They enforced death sentences against informers of the Soviet authorities, plundered government stores – all in the unreal hope of receiving military aid from the West. Soviet authorities incorporated the occupied territory into the Belorussian and Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republics<sup>16</sup>.

The new rulers profited from the radical Polish inter-war ethnic policies. In many localities, moreover, the Red Army was welcomed by the Polish administration as an ally against the German invaders in the west. In many places the provisional Soviet administration could call on the services of spontaneously formed worker militias. Communist functionaries sent to the new western territories reported that they had been welcomed by the Belorussians who viewed the legalization of their language by the new administration as an act of liberation. Peasant committees convened to distribute land and livestock to farm workers who had not owned any property before. On October 30, 1939, the new government confiscated all land belonging to the gentry, churches, and monasteries as well as properties belonging to well-to-do private persons. The creation of state-owned farms dragged on slowly, however, and against the will of most peasants. Soon, black-market prices for grain were about 15 times higher than the regulated government price. The constantly growing inflation consumed personal savings<sup>17</sup>.

<sup>15</sup> W.K. ROMAN, *Die sowjetische Okkupation der polnischen Ostgebiete 1939 bis 1941*, in B. CHIARI (ed), *Die polnische Heimatarmee*, pp. 87-110.

<sup>16</sup> T. STRZEMBOSZ (ed), *Studia z dziejów okupacji sowieckiej (1939-1941)*, Warszawa 1997.

<sup>17</sup> See K. JASIEWICZ, *Zagłada polskich kresów. Ziemiaństwo polskie na Kresach Północno-Wschodnich Rzeczypospolitej pod okupacją sowiecką 1939-1941*, Warszawa 1998.

«Sovietization» brought about a comprehensive change in the composition of elites. Several stages of 'co-ordination' and control introduced a new social order – Soviet rule. But Soviet bureaucracy was far from being in effective control of this process. Disciplinary problems were common. Administrative positions were filled with Soviet cadres from the western regions, but also from other parts of the Soviet Union<sup>18</sup>.

The scarce jobs in an economically undeveloped region had to be shared among the indigenous population and the refugees arriving across the inefficiently guarded border to German-occupied Poland. In contrast to Belorussians and Jews, Poles found many opportunities for advancement closed. To an increasing extent, Soviet authorities tended to remove Polish officials from key positions in public administration and to discriminate against them on the job market. The transformation of the economy into a planned economy had a particularly profound effect on the Jewish population since the Jews were strongly represented in trade and industry. For many Polish Jews on the other hand, the advance of the Red Army meant protection from the Germans in the west. Furthermore, Soviet bureaucracy offered them many chances for advancement<sup>19</sup>.

Private-sector violence characterized the new regime. Hardly any constraints were imposed on personal enrichment or the patronage or 'punishment' of acquaintances. The unbridled searching of houses by the new authorities demonstrated the extent of the inhabitant's very real defenselessness. Besides weapons, personal property was also 'confiscated'. Many people associated the new Soviet administration with memories of the terrors of the Polish-Soviet War of 1920<sup>20</sup>.

Contrary to Soviet historiography, the German-Soviet campaign of 1939 did not lead to the «reunification» of a «Belorussian» country that had been violently divided<sup>21</sup>. The war in Belarus did not start in 1941 but in

<sup>18</sup> G. SIMON, *Instrumente der Sowjetisierung in den annektierten westlichen Gebieten der Sowjetunion 1939-1950*, in H. LEMBERG (ed), *Sowjetisches Modell und Nationale Prägung. Kontinuität und Wandel in Ostmitteleuropa nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg*, Marburg 1991, pp. 13-20.

<sup>19</sup> N. DAVIES - A. POLONSKY (eds), *Jews in Eastern Poland and the USSR, 1939-1946*, London 1991.

<sup>20</sup> S. PLAGGENBORG, *Gewalt und Militanz in Sowjetrußland 1917-1930*, in «Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas», NF, 44, 1996, pp. 409-430.

<sup>21</sup> I.P. KREN', *Der Einsatz der Armia Krajowa auf dem Territorium Weißrußlands aus weißrussischer Sicht. Versuch einer Ortsbestimmung*, in B. CHIARI (ed), *Die polnische*

September 1939. The events following the Soviet-German treaty from August 1939 are extremely important if one wishes to understand Operation Barbarossa (*Unternehmen Barbarossa*). The Poles, who were hardly given anything beyond their language as an avenue for self-determination, regarded their Belorussian and Jewish neighbors as 'war profiteers' who capitalized on the new circumstances. «Sovietization» between 1939 and the summer of 1941 proved to be insufficient to transform the society completely according to Soviet concepts. Instead, it produced an enormous upheaval and released a remarkable potential for violence and personal conflict. This was of decisive importance for the course of the future German rule.

#### 4. German occupation after 1941

The occupied territory was initially placed under German military administration. A separate agency led by Hermann Göring in his capacity as plenipotentiary of the Four-Year Plan was responsible for the economic exploitation of the country: Economic Control Staff East (*Wirtschaftsführungsstab Ost*). Plans for establishing a civilian administration did not begin until later. The person in charge was Alfred Rosenberg whom Hitler had appointed *Reichsminister für die besetzten Ostgebiete*. Rosenberg took over the three Baltic Soviet Republics and the western parts of Belarus and Ukraine from the Supreme Command of the Wehrmacht (*Oberkommando der Wehrmacht*) on August 1. He set up Commissioner's Offices Ukraine and Eastland (*Reichskommissariate Ukraine and Ostland*), which were headed by the responsible commissioners in Rivne and Riga. In the Ostland, Gauleiter Hinrich Lohse assumed control of the administration in August 1941. He was responsible for the three general districts (*Generalbezirke*) of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, whose borders were for the most part identical with those of the Soviet republics. The fourth administrative division in Lohse's area of responsibility was the Belarus Commissioner General's Office (*Generalkommissariat Weißruthenien*) that consisted primarily of those parts of the BSSR that had been incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1939<sup>22</sup>.

*Heimatarmee*, pp. 585-598; S.P. BORODIN, *Die weißrussische Geschichtsschreibung und Publizistik und die Heimatarmee in den nordöstlichen Gebieten der Republik Polen 1939 bis 1945*, in B. CHIARI (ed), *Die polnische Heimatarmee*, pp. 599-616.

<sup>22</sup> A. DALLIN, *German Rule in Russia, 1941-1945: a Study of Occupation Policies*, London 1957.

Hitler charged Heinrich Himmler, whose *Einsatzgruppen* (task forces) had begun to savage the civilian population in the wake of the Wehrmacht's attacks, with implementing the racial objectives of the war of extermination (*rassenideologischer Vernichtungskrieg*). In his capacity as Chief of SS and Chief of the German Police (*Reichsführer SS und Chef der deutschen Polizei*), Himmler was responsible for securing the occupied eastern territories. The respective Higher Police and SS Leader (*Höherer Polizei- und SS-Führer*) in the offices of the Reich Commissioners commanded not only German police units but also local security forces. Minister Rosenberg and his *Reichskommissare* (Reich Commissioners) remained, however, nominally in charge of the areas under civil administration. Their duties involved ensuring that the German policies concerning exploitation, extermination, and resettlement were carried out. However, from the outset, there were divergent official ideas about the future of the former Soviet territory. Initially, no policy for the future form of Belarus existed in the Ministry for the East (*Ostministerium*)<sup>23</sup>.

From September 1941, Wilhelm Kube, a German clerk who saw himself as the patriarch of Belarus, headed the Generalkommissariat Weißruthenien. His civilian administration became part of the German machinery of exploitation and allowed itself to become involved in the racial war of extermination. Kube's office put up no resistance to the murder of Belorussian Jews. On the contrary, it supported the project to the best of its ability from its inception in 1941. In several stages the isolation and disenfranchisement of the Jewish population escalated to systematic mass murder<sup>24</sup>.

The (German) civil administration extended to the level of the *Gebietskommissariate* (Regional Commissioner's Offices). Below this level, the authorities availed themselves of the existing indigenous administrative machinery. In the agricultural sector, the German administration was present at the county level. German district farmers (*Kreislandwirte*) registered and requisitioned foodstuffs. However, they were also responsible

<sup>23</sup> R.B. BIRN, *Die Höheren SS- und Polizeiführer. Himmlers Vertreter im Reich und in den besetzten Gebieten*, Düsseldorf 1998. See also H. BUCHHEIM, *Anatomie des SS-Staates*, vol. 1: *Die SS – das Herrschaftsinstrument. Befehl und Gehorsam*, Freiburg 1965; H.-D. HANDRACK, *Das Reichskommissariat Ostland. Die Kulturpolitik der deutschen Verwaltung zwischen Verwaltung und Gleichschaltung 1941-1944*, Hannoversch-Münden 1981.

<sup>24</sup> L. SMILOVICKIJ, *Katastrofa evreev v Belorussii, 1941-1944 gg.*, Tel Aviv 2000; *Judenfrei! Svobodno ot evreev! Istorija minskogo getto v dokumentach*, Minsk 1999.

for selecting villages for «reprisals and destruction» and were to play a central role in setting up an indigenous police force<sup>25</sup>.

From a German viewpoint, the implementation of occupation structures in Belarus faced severe difficulties. In January 1942, the Generalkommissariat Weißruthenien comprised an area of around 60,000 square kilometers with two and a half million inhabitants. Since the beginning of the German occupation, national conflicts had impacted negatively on the two main objectives of German policy, that is, economic exploitation and security.

In Belarus, regulations banned Poles from participating in public administration, but official approaches to the solution of practical problems varied. In those cities and villages where many Poles had initially regarded the German invasion as liberation from Soviet rule, the Wehrmacht used Polish functionaries in the administration. The arrival of the German civil administration heralded their replacement by Belorussian personnel. Ethnic strife broke out already in the first months, with Poles denouncing «chauvinist Belorussians», and Belorussian administrators and police opposing the Poles who, in their view, were deceiving the German occupiers and slowly «Polonizing» the region<sup>26</sup>. The debate on the Polish village Jedwabne has recently brought the problem of local anti-Semitism to the consciousness of a broader public – a phenomenon the German invaders could count on in many places<sup>27</sup>.

<sup>25</sup> R.-D. MÜLLER, *Hitlers Ostkrieg und die deutsche Siedlungspolitik. Die Zusammenarbeit von Wehrmacht, Wirtschaft und SS*, Frankfurt a.M. 1991; see also R.-D. MÜLLER, *Von der Wirtschaftsallianz zum kolonialen Ausbeutungskrieg*, in *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg*, 4, pp. 141-245.

<sup>26</sup> C. GERLACH, *Kalkulierte Morde. Die deutsche Wirtschafts- und Vernichtungspolitik in Weißrußland 1941-1944*, Hamburg 1999.

<sup>27</sup> See J.T. GROSS, *Sąsiedzi. Historia zagłady żydowskiego miasteczka*, Sejny 2000 (*Nachbarn. Der Mord an den Juden von Jedwabne*, München 2001); P. MACHCEWICZ - K. PERSAK (eds), *Wokół Jedwabnego*, Warszawa 2002; see also R. HENNING (ed), *Die «Jedwabne-Debatte» in polnischen Zeitungen und Zeitschriften* (TRANSODRA, Deutsch-polnische Informationsbulletin, 23, Dezember 2001, Deutsch-polnische Gesellschaft Brandenburg), Potsdam 2001; B. MUSIAL, *Thesen zum Pogrom in Jedwabne. Kritische Anmerkungen zu der Darstellung der «Nachbarn»*, in «Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas», NF, 50, 2002, 2, pp. 381-411, and F. GOLCZEWSKI, *Der Jedwabne-Diskurs. Bemerkungen im Anschluß an den Artikel von Bogdan Musial*, pp. 412-437; see also F. GOLCZEWSKI, *Die Heimatarmee*, pp. 635-677.

## 5. *Everyday life in an occupied society*

Soviet historians as well as many researchers on the racist or economic German plans for the occupied territories have not taken into account the fact that occupation meant a change in daily life, but not the end of daily life itself. Neither Belorussians, Poles, nor Jews knew what to expect from the new regime. Some eventually hoped for professional advancement or material advantages. Collaboration – I prefer the expression «interaction» – as a form of life insurance existed at all levels of society. Rolf-Dieter Müller talked on «Love during the *Vernichtungskrieg* in the East» in his inauguration speech at the Humboldt-University in Berlin. He noted that hundreds of thousands of women in the occupied Soviet Union had sexual and/or love relations with German officers and soldiers. These relations gave the bureaucrats of the *NS-Rassenideologie* bad dreams, but even they couldn't come up with a solution for how to deal with the phenomenon<sup>28</sup>.

An indigenous administrative organization existed from the level of the so-called «rayons» (districts) down to the villages. Without the involvement of indigenous administrators the exploitation of the region for the purposes of the Wehrmacht would not have been possible. The district representatives (*Rayonvertretungen*) constituted the top level of indigenous self-administration. The local administration was integrated into the German system of levies-in-kind, and its representatives were threatened with draconian punishment in case of insufficient performance. Largely for this reason the administration was particularly brutal in enforcing German demands. Indigenous mayors shielded their villages from the outside world. Citizens' militias sought to protect farms against plunderers. By enforcing the levies-in-kind or selecting forced laborers for the occupiers, the mayors compromised themselves in the eyes of their neighbors. They often had Red Army stragglers, partisans, or ghetto refugees arrested and turned over to the German authorities<sup>29</sup>.

Village elders did not have much to offer to their people. The central issue of land ownership remained unresolved. After the Soviet evacuations,

<sup>28</sup> R.-D. MÜLLER, *Liebe im Vernichtungskrieg. Geschlechtergeschichtliche Aspekte des Einsatzes deutscher Soldaten im Rußlandkrieg 1941-1944*, in F. BECKER - T. GROSSBÖLTING - A. OWZAR - R. SCHLÖGL (eds), *Politische Gewalt in der Moderne*, Münster 2003, pp. 239-267.

<sup>29</sup> W. BENZ (ed), *Einsatz im «Reichskommissariat Ostland». Dokumente zum Völkermord im Baltikum und in Weißrußland 1941-1944*, Berlin 1998.

the isolation of the Jews and the devastation of war, agriculture remained practically the only functioning sector of the Belorussian economy. The occupation regime antagonized the peasants by initially maintaining state collective farms and even by continuing the process of collectivization begun by the Soviets in the western regions after 1939. By 1942, when German propaganda had changed its tune in order to obtain the support of the population for the new rulers, it was already too late. In the countryside, requisitions and partisan warfare had become a fact of daily life. Property intended for distribution to especially faithful peasants had long ceased to be in the hands of the occupiers. The peasants had to till their fields in a no-man's-land. Neither could they depend on German protection against armed gangs nor could they rely on not being struck by sudden German reprisals<sup>30</sup>.

The German mass murder of the Jews had a very direct impact on the occupied society. It occurred in plain view of the region's inhabitants. As we know, few condemned this crime. Often, the same stereotypes were heard: Jews would not work, but preferred to live at the expense of others. The rejection of the Soviet collective farms was projected onto the Jews as well. They were said to have managed the major state farms and to have held important posts in the Soviet bureaucracy. For opponents of the Soviet system, the enemy was often not communism itself, but «Jewish communism». The 'explanation' for the shootings of the initial weeks provided by a Jewish survivor who found refuge with a Soviet partisan brigade is characteristic of the anti-Semitic potential within the non-Jewish population. In the course of his interrogation the man expressed his suspicion that the shooting took place to «rehabilitate» the German administration «in the eyes of the people»<sup>31</sup>.

With the «normalization» of daily life under occupation, the steady advance of the Wehrmacht and the transfer of Belarus to civilian control, German authorities intensified their search for Jews in hiding. Especially in the countryside this would have been impossible without the help of the indigenous police. Belorussian prison wardens released prisoners to

<sup>30</sup> B. BONWETSCH, *Sowjetische Partisanen 1941-1944. Legenden und Wirklichkeit des «allgemeinen Volkskrieges»*, in G. SCHULZ (ed), *Partisanen und Volkskrieg. Zur Revolutionierung des Krieges im 20. Jahrhundert*, Göttingen 1985, pp. 92-124; L. KLINKHAMMER, *Der Partisanenkrieg der Wehrmacht 1941-1944*, in R.-D. MÜLLER - H.-E. VOLKMAN (eds), *Die Wehrmacht. Mythos und Realität*, München 1999, pp. 815-836.

<sup>31</sup> Nacyjanal'nyj Archiu Rėspubliki Belarus' (hereafter NARB), Interrogation Samuil S. Jankelevič, 5.12.1944, fond 750, opis' 1, delo 112, l. 18.

their relatives literally for their weight in gold. Some fugitives escaped the roving German death squads and hid with Polish families. Other non-Jewish neighbors prevented such attempts to flee. The guards of the Baranoviči ghetto sold Jewish property to non-Jewish locals for Vodka. Other people traveled to the surrounding villages to trade requisitioned articles for food. As long as the Jewish population was not completely isolated, Poles and Belorussians continued to do business with them. Particularly handsome profits could be made from trading in livestock and from illegal slaughtering. Enough people were waiting for additional food in the ghettos. When such transactions came to the notice of the authorities, the non-Jewish defendants sought to save their skins by blaming everything on the implicated Jews who, as a rule, were subsequently turned over to the Gestapo and shot. Poles and Belorussians had a better chance of escaping with a prison sentence<sup>32</sup>.

The example of the town of Mir illustrates the impact of Germany's «final solution» (*Endlösung*) on small communities in Belarus. In 1921, Mir had 4,000 inhabitants, more than half of them Jews. Until 1939, Poles had held all-important posts in government and business. Indigenous police was involved in one of the very first 'cleansings' that took place shortly after the German occupation in July 1941. During a major German action on November 9th, about 1,200 Jews fell victim to a massacre in the streets and houses of the town. Local inhabitants were involved in the rioting. Belorussian police shot many fleeing ghetto inhabitants and took part in mass executions outside the town. In May 1942, the ghetto received information about further German plans to murder the Jews. A Belorussian peasant who had been asked to obtain weapons gave the plans for an uprising away to the Belorussian police. Not only did the Belorussian head of the local administration in Mir sell the Jewish council information about German plans (*Großaktionen*); he also promised to thwart them for an appropriate fee. During a second pogrom in Mir, Belorussian men and women led the police to their Jewish neighbors' hiding places. However, the search for Jews in Mir was not over with the pogroms. During the days that followed, the locals also busied themselves with searching the town for survivors. The place was left in ruins – and the city of Mir is just one example of the devastating effect the Nazi policy had not only

<sup>32</sup> B. CHIARI, *Das Schicksal der weißrussischen Juden im «Generalkommissariat Weißruthenien»*. Eine Annäherung an das Unbegreifliche, in W. BENZ - J. WETZEL (eds), *Solidarität und Hilfe für Juden während der NS-Zeit. Regionalstudien 3. Dänemark, Niederlande, Spanien, Portugal, Ungarn, Albanien, Weißrußland*, Berlin 1999, pp. 271-309.

on one group of the population, but on multi-ethnic collectives in their entirety<sup>33</sup>.

## 6. Indigenous police forces

A local police force was intended to compensate for the shortage of German police in the occupied territories. With the failure of the Wehrmacht's advance on Moscow, the settlement schemes of the race ideologists began to lose their vigor. Pragmatic considerations of how to secure the «German hinterland» now came to the fore. For this purpose, various indigenous police forces were set up in Belarus. Their initial designation as *Ordnungsdienst* was later changed to that of a *Schutzmannschaft*. Apart from these, the Belorussian SS and police chiefs had a number of mixed or pure Ukrainian, Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian police battalions at their disposal. These battalions were continually reinforced during the war and for the most part carried out combat missions against partisans. They were also employed during extermination operations or in «ghetto clearance» operations<sup>34</sup>.

The small police stations that, in 1941, had been established throughout the Commissioner General's Office (*Generalkommissariat*) played a very important part in the occupied society and everyday life in the villages. It was here that the occupying regime was directly confronted with various forms of military resistance. Indigenous policemen were among the principal helpers of the new order. Not only did they support the economic exploitation of the occupied territories and the fight against the partisans, they also were involved in the murder of the Jewish population and the

<sup>33</sup> J. MATTHÄUS, «Reibungslos und planmäßig». *Die zweite Welle der Judenvernichtung im Generalkommissariat Weißruthenien (1942-1944)*, in «Jahrbuch für Antisemitismusforschung», 4, 1995, pp. 254-274; see also Gendarmerie Post in Mir to Regional Gendarmerie Commander, Apprehension and summary execution of a partisan, 13.8.1942, Džjaržaŭny Arkhiŭ Bresckaj voblasci, fond 995, opis' 1, delo 7, l. 182.

<sup>34</sup> See Bundesarchiv, The Reichsführer SS, O.-Kdo. I. g Nr. 24/41 (g.), 25.07.1941, R 19/326, p. 1; J. FÖRSTER, *Die Sicherung des «Lebensraums»*, in *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg*, vol. 4, pp. 1030-1078. To illustrate the character of so called «clearing operations», see NARB, v. Gottberg Combat Group, Operational Order for Operation «Hermann», 07.07.1943, fond 370, opis' 1, delo 1880, l. 60-71; von Gottberg Combat Group, Combat Report on Operation «Hermann», 20.08.1943, NARB, fond 370, opis' 1, delo 1880, l. 104-112 ob., v. Gottberg Combat Group, Order for Evacuation, 1.8.1943, Bundesarchiv, RS 3-36/5, or R. MICHAELIS, *Das SS-Sonderkommando Dirlwanger. Ein Beispiel deutscher Besatzungspolitik in Weißrußland*, Berlin 1999<sup>2</sup>.

recruitment of forced laborers<sup>35</sup>. Police personnel (*Schutzleute*) contributed to the escalation of violence and were themselves highly exposed to Soviet or Polish vengeance. The police force personified the occupation rule and made it visible to everyone. Their effectiveness and military power became even more important as the war went on<sup>36</sup>.

Although indigenous forces were never put on the same level as German security forces, they nevertheless offered Belorussians and Poles an opportunity for social advancement. Especially in the early stages of the occupation, there was a sufficient number of young men who gladly joined the police. However, just like the indigenous local administration, the local police force only fulfilled a subordinate ancillary function for the occupiers. For German SS and police commanders, they were a necessary evil. At no time were they to be an expression of the Belorussians' sense of national identity. Unlike German civil administration representatives, police protection forces (*Schutzmannschaften*), however, were present not only in the county and district seats, but in the countryside as well. Policemen constantly found themselves in situations that invited abuse or personal aggrandizement. In the summer of 1943, for instance, the Higher SS and Police Commander imposed the death penalty on conducting business with civilians. When caught stealing, the leaders of police detachments would declare time and again that they were carrying out requisitions for the Wehrmacht<sup>37</sup>.

On the one hand, German police officers and members of the SS joked about dumb, drunken, and filthy criminals in police uniforms, who could not be distinguished from the bandits they should be fighting. On the other hand, among the indigenous policemen there were some who performed their duties with great enthusiasm<sup>38</sup>. In the western regions of Belarus, in particular, many young Belorussians and Poles regarded police work as a chance for personal advancement. Uniforms and insignia of

<sup>35</sup> R.D. MÜLLER, *Die Zwangsrekrutierung von «Ostarbeitern» 1941-1944*, in W. MICHALKA (ed), *Der Zweite Weltkrieg. Analysen, Grundzüge, Forschungsbilanz*, München 1989, pp. 772-783.

<sup>36</sup> See Gosudarstvennyj archiv Rossijskoj Federacij, Gendarmerie post Mir to the Police Regional Commander in Baranovichi, 23.04.1944, fond R-7021, opis' 148, delo 364, l. 51-69.

<sup>37</sup> M. DEAN, *Collaboration in the Holocaust. Crimes of the Local Police in Belorussia and Ukraine, 1941-1944*, Basingstoke 2000.

<sup>38</sup> NARB, SS-Brigadeführer von Gottberg to the Commanders of SS and Police, Minsk, 10.04.1943, fond 370, opis' 1, delo 1264, l. 126-136.

rank held a powerful attraction, not only for Germans. Against regulations, some policemen wore German collar patches and rank insignia as a symbol of power. Ruthlessness and reliability in the performance of assignments promised promotion, additional training, and advancement in the established hierarchy. Policemen identified themselves with their work and strongly valued their 'dignity', which can be seen by the fact that they used to beat anyone who failed to show them proper respect and deference. The Soviet deportations had happened only in the recent past. For many peasants who had lost their farms or even family members during the Sovietization of eastern Poland, police duty offered an opportunity to settle old scores. Viewed against the background of its early success, the ultimate failure of the German Wehrmacht was unforeseeable in 1941/42<sup>39</sup>.

However, working for the police was a very risky job. As early as the summer of 1942, anxiety about the consequences of police service can be identified. Time and again, indigenous policemen demanded conscription so as not to put their families at risk by volunteering. Some of those called up sought to insure themselves for the time after the war by supporting partisan brigades with information, ammunition or food. There were constant attempts from both Polish and Soviet sides to infiltrate the police. But fear and insecurity were common on the Soviet side as well. Warnings about Gestapo agents show that contact with indigenous police remained a dangerous thing right up to the withdrawal of German troops. Police detachments in plain clothes stirred up negative feelings towards Soviet partisans through provocations, murders, and plundering<sup>40</sup>.

Police and village elders who, after the war, were tried for war crimes by NKVD courts often claimed to have been involved only indirectly in shootings or arrests. However, indigenous police, too, frequently killed people in the course of «reprisal, requisitioning and extermination actions», and before shooting them often beat them so severely that they reached their place of execution more dead than alive. When they were looking for partisans, policemen smashed the faces of relatives and mistreated them so badly that the victims were bed-ridden for weeks. Brutality and sadism

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, «List of recommendations for medals of bravery», 1943/44, Dzjaržaŭny Arkhiŭ Bresckaj voblastci, fond 995, opis' 1, delo 5, l. 19.

<sup>40</sup> To get an impression of the extent of violence in the occupied territories, see Oberkommando der Wehrmacht/Wehrmachtführungsstab/Op. Nr. 00 2821/42 g. Kdos, Order No. 46, Guidelines for intensified combat against the problem of activity by bands in the East, from the Führer, Bundesarchiv, NS 19/1671, pp. 113-116.

occurred among both Germans and locals. In many ways, then, the local police became ever more deeply involved in the brutality of everyday life in the occupied areas that was so characteristic of German rule.

After three years of German occupation, the Red Army resumed possession of an almost totally destroyed region. Even before the first steps towards recovery were taken, the NKVD began to search for collaborators. Mayors and local policemen were among those representatives of the occupation regime on whom Soviet search efforts centered.

## 7. Summary

When the Germans occupied the BSSR in the summer of 1941, an occupation regime was created in which SD, SS, police, Wehrmacht, civil administration, and German economic agencies vied for influence. Their primary goal was the economic exploitation of the region for war purposes and the protection of the Wehrmacht's rear area.

German agencies made use of an indigenous self-government, which had to carry out the orders and fulfill the demands of the occupiers. Contemporaneous German policies, high taxation, and the lack of a political vision soon destroyed the initial hopes of many inhabitants for a better life after Soviet rule. Soviet, Polish, and other resistance groups increasingly gained ground over the duration of the war<sup>41</sup>. German security forces reacted to this development with brutal countermeasures and, finally, with the devastation of entire regions. Ethnic tension reinforced the spreading violence. From the fall of 1942 onwards, Belarus (*Weißrußland*) was ever more frequently the scene of major military incidents and clashes. The policy of «Belorussification» was poorly suited to obtaining the support of the large Polish minority for the occupiers. Indigenous police forces and administration were an integral part of the German system of rule and fulfilled important functions. Without them, economic exploitation and political control would have been hardly possible. They played an important role in suppressing Soviet «activists» and in enforcing the German «final solution to the Jewish problem» in Belarus. Many locals performed their duties by conviction or associated it with hopes for professional or social advancement. This attitude resulted in their increasing

<sup>41</sup> V. ERMOLovič - S. ŽUMAR, *Ognēm i mečom. Chronika pol'skogo nacionalisti-českogo podpol'ja v Belorussii (1939-1953 gg.)*, Minsk 1994; J. SJAMAŠKA, *Armia Kraeva na Belarusi*, Minsk 1994.

involvement in the brutalization of everyday life in the occupied areas. From the beginning, the war in the East was not comparable to Western Europe or the Scandinavian countries. From a «legalistic approach», the German Rule in the Soviet Union violated International law in almost every way. The devastating results of the occupation were multiplied by the complex political and ethnic situation in Poland and the Soviet Union in the inter-war period, as well as by Sovietization after 1939.

After years of intense discussions about the war in the East, there is still an unknown war which remains to be explored. Research on everyday life in the occupied societies of Eastern Europe is very complicated, and systematically problematic<sup>42</sup>. It would be most fascinating to write the biography of a single Belorussian peasant or craftsman, who remembered the Russian Empire, dealt with German, Polish, and Soviet troops in war and civil war, tried to escape collectivization and Stalinist terror, faced the second German occupation after 1941, and finally confronted the NKVD after liberation in 1944, when he was punished for the fact that he and his family had somehow survived on German occupied «Soviet» soil. Another story could be told about a young Pole, who joined the Polish police in a small town, at the age of 19, somewhere near the Soviet-Polish border in the late thirties, became a citizen of the USSR in 1939 and lost his father and the family farm, during the deportations of 1940. He joined the indigenous *Schutzmannschaft* in 1941 because he wanted revenge, but secretly supported the Polish Home Army, and, after desertion from German service, eventually fell during the battle for Vilnius that became a Lithuanian city after the war.

Detailed war biographies of this kind do not exist. But only case studies, dealing with individuals, villages, companies, or such social collectives as police units could give us a deeper understanding of the world of war victims, who often became part of a criminal system themselves. How average people met a new form of rule in Belorussia after 1939 or 1941, is much more difficult to find in the documents than the marks left by the German *Wirtschaftspolitik* or *Rassenideologie*. When I told the story of a wartime-village in the collection of essays *Die Wehrmacht. Mythos und Realität*, I had to invent the typical village Šmakoviči for this purpose<sup>43</sup>. The exploration of the unknown war has just begun. The picture, we

<sup>42</sup> Alexander Brakel, Mainz University, is working on his PhD on the German Occupation system in Baranoviči area.

<sup>43</sup> B. CHIARI, *Die Büchse der Pandora. Ein Dorf in Weißrußland 1939-1944*, in R.-D. MÜLLER - H.-E. VOLKMANN (eds), *Die Wehrmacht*, pp. 879-900.

obtain in this way will inevitably be a very complex one, because life in a multiethnic border region was very complex. Belorussia was the «battlefield of dictatorships», as Dietrich Beyrau put it. Its cultural richness was destroyed almost completely by the war – in a material and a mental sense. We should try to save at least the remembrance of a lost world.

