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Today it seems almost customary to apologise for writing another book on the events between 1941 and 1945 that came to be known as the Holocaust, Shoah, or the Genocide of the Jews.(1) The explosion of scholarship since the late 1980s has filled entire libraries with information on the Holocaust and established a basic chronology. Mass shootings, the misery of ghettos and camps and gas were the primary killing methods. When historians delve into the Holocaust, such writing involves critical actors, though the focus has shifted from Hitler’s ‘gang’ (Franz Neumann, 1942) to ‘ordinary men’ (Christopher R. Browning, 1992) and, for over a decade now, women. Various explanations of the Holocaust’s origins and implementation have appeared, including modernity, imperialism, colonialism, state destruction, sadism, nationalism and deep-rooted antisemitism.(2)

Intimate Violence is intriguing and adopts a new approach. Written by Jeffrey S. Kopstein and Jason Wittenberg, two political scientists teaching at the University of California at Irvine and Berkeley, it stands out in its methodology and object – pogroms occurring in the western borderlands of today’s Poland, Ukraine and Lithuania during the summer of 1941.

Since the emergence of the field of Holocaust studies, political scientists and sociologists have offered innovative research. One remembers the late Raul Hilberg, Zygmunt Bauman, Jan T. Gross or, more recently, Daniel J. Goldhagen, though the polemic that his book Hitler’s Willing Executioners stirred has proven unrepresentative for the usually fruitful dialogs between both academic disciplines.(3) However, the last generation of political scientists has been somewhat reluctant to address the Holocaust. Perhaps, as Charles King suggested in 2012, the question of the ‘uniqueness’ of the events has prevented scholars from tackling vital questions of wartime occupation and its complex relationship to violence, local resistance and genocidal policymaking.(4) Thus, we should applaud the fact that along with Evgeny Finkel’s 2017 monograph on the survival strategies of Ordinary Jews, Kopstein and Wittenberg took an initiative with this critical, interdisciplinary step toward a subtler understanding of the origins of communal violence.

Jan T. Gross’s 2001 study Neighbors about the Jedwabne massacre on 10 July 1941 has fundamentally changed how scholars write about pogroms during the Holocaust. Shortly after Nazi Germany launched Operation Barbarossa and invaded the Soviet Union, in a zone that had been occupied by both regimes, the small town of Jedwabne near Łomża saw the Poles drowning and hunting down their Jewish neighbours before dragging a sizeable portion - several hundred - into a barn, which was then set aflame.(5) This staggering re-evaluation of the Polish involvement in the wartime murder of Jews provoked a wave of shock throughout the country. Many Poles had become numb to the sufferings of other ethnicities - such as the Jewish fate, which, they feared, would largely conceal their own martyrdom - as a result of the Soviet education that hid local involvement in the Holocaust and saw crystallised evil in Nazi Germany alone. Despite many critical reviews and acrimonious attacks on the part of skeptical readers and pseudo-historians - consider the recent revival of Polish right-wing nationalism - Jan T. Gross’s
appalling account still stands. The book under review must be understood as an effort to position his findings within a long-awaited comparative perspective. The authors place Jedwabne within an intense wave of pogroms that occurred during the summer of 1941. Kopstein and Wittenberg argue that Jedwabne is a tragic fragment of a larger phenomenon of communal violence rooted in the political landscape of the interwar years. In 219 towns in Eastern Poland, Western Ukraine, Lithuania and Romania, inhabitants violently turned against their Jewish neighbours between June and late July of 1941. In areas torn by quickly changing political allegiances and hastily abandoned by the Soviet state apparatus but not yet entirely under Nazi control, pogroms had a strong connection, Kopstein and Wittenberg argue, with interwar political behaviour. The pogroms, understood as neighbour-on-neighbour violence, can be explained, they convincingly demonstrate, by local politics that tended to suppress Jewish claims for political representation and national rights. In the context of the strong revival of Polish ethno-nationalism after the Soviets had left these western borderlands, pogroms occurred in which non-Jewish inhabitants oppressed those they thought would be their future political rivals. The question of the origins of these brutal events runs throughout this short but important monograph. Its approach is consistent with current debates on micro-conflicts in the social sciences, with which historians have only timidly engaged as of yet. Most historians still tend to neglect, if not forget, the political antecedents of wartime events in general accounts and textbooks of the multiple places, people and events involved in the Holocaust. Why did pogroms occur in these places? In their refreshing analysis, Kopstein and Wittenberg establish lines of continuity between the inter-war period and 1941 and review the political struggles that had taken place since the creation of the Polish state in 1918. The authors draw on the Polish censuses of 1921 and 1931, including information on ethnic and religious identity, as well as levels of literacy. To illustrate the political landscape, Kopstein and Wittenberg refer to the elections of 1922 and 1928. They investigated these elections at the municipal level, which yielded votes for 22 parties, including eight internally divided Jewish parties. Whatever historians may think of the lenses with which the authors read the database comprising over two thousand localities in six provinces (voivodeships), its creation should be applauded. Brandishing an ethnolinguistic-Christian ideal of Polishness and spurred on by the charismatic Roman Dmowski (1864–1939), the National Democrats (Endecja) called for a unified state composed of Poles alone. In the face of their Darwinian beliefs regarding competing races, the national consensus set up by dictator Marshal Józef Piłsudski (1867–1935), along with the Non-Party Bloc for Cooperation with the Government (Bezpartyjny Blok Współpracy z Rzgadem), accommodated ethnic minorities in exchange for their allegiance to a state led by Poles. The authors make it clear that multiple languages, cultures and ethnicities were increasingly divided by political tensions during the 1920s. In addition to almost five million Ukrainians and two million
Belarusians, three million Jews, mostly in the urban Eastern borderlands, felt deeply underrepresented in Parliament and overruled by a lack of autonomous institutions, let alone a Jewish National Council. The Zionist, Revisionist Zionist - under the leadership of Vladimir (Zev) Jabotinsky - and Bundist organisations were all rooted in Jewish nationalism, called for a Jewish state in Palestine or, in the case of the Bundists, a Yiddish nation in Poland.

As Kopstein and Wittenberg demonstrate in subsequent chapters, pre-existing ethnic tensions exploded when the Soviet occupiers established their political rule. Beyond the electoral statistics and the two censuses, the authors delve into survivor memoirs from the Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute, Warsaw, collected between 1945 and 1947, and the Yizkor books representing Jewish wartime memories. As a dramatic break with the past, the new regime wished to quell Polish nationalism (as undesired as any other form of nationalism) in the Soviet state and removed Poles from posts of responsibility. For instance, drawing on previous calculations, the authors reveal that among the 9,000–12,000 people working in the state administration in the Białystok region, fewer than 3,000 were Polish (p. 60). Once the Soviet authority collapsed due to the Nazi invasion, most of the pogroms occurred during a six–week period beginning on 22 June 1941. Unleashed by dissipating legal restraint and sometimes, but not always, incited by the Germans, the perpetrators concentrated, Kopstein and Wittenberg argue, not on the prior collaborations between local Jews and the Soviets but on the role Poles feared those Jews would play in the future political landscape (p. 57). Here, the authors build on the power-threat theory. First applied to the lynching of African-American men, it holds that in places where minority groups threaten the dominance of majority groups, the majority will take action.(7) It is true that too often, ethnic violence has only been explained by state-led violence and the importance of old or new elites. Yet in the summer of 1941, as the authors rightly demonstrate, the Nazi and local elites were only in the making. As a result, several conditions necessary for a pogrom emerge from Kopstein’s and Wittenberg’s painstaking efforts to create and analyse this extensive database. First and foremost, the size of the local Jewish community mattered. Pogrom localities had more than ten times as many Jewish inhabitants as non-pogrom localities. Equally important were the Jewish call for cultural and political representation and the popularity of parties that favoured interethnic dialog, such as the so-called Bloc of National Minorities and the Galician Zionists. Pogroms occurred in places where the perceived threat of and the longing for an ethnically homogenous state were higher, rather than where there was widespread approval of parties engaging in ethnic tolerance and national equality for Jews. The analysis concludes on firm correlations between electoral behaviours, the perceived threat of an ethnic minority, the demographic weight of the latter and political integration and exclusion during wartime. In those towns where pre-war political polarisation existed, state collapse and war increased ethnic tensions, reopened old sores and brought about pogroms.
The arguments are mostly convincing because the authors emphasise political integration, a notion misrepresented by historians, in understanding pogroms. As a side note, the book’s subtitle, *On the Eve*, somewhat misleads the reader by suggesting that pogroms were not an integral part of the events that historians generally group under the term ‘the Holocaust’. Whatever one’s stance on the timeline of the ‘Final Solution’ may be — between June and December of 1941 — the gruesome events depicted here belong to the Holocaust.

The book poses many fascinating questions, some of which I wish to address in my capacity as a historian. The heated context of racial and nationalistic ideas that led, in the summer and fall of 1941, to ‘generative violence’, to use Max Bergholz’s term, is not new for historians of Central and Eastern Europe. However, such historians have focused on nationalism related to Nazi colonialism, not the origins of pogroms. The political character of the latter, as the authors show, reveals how perilous nationalism and nation-building can be when wartime allegiances and lowered moral sensibilities are combined with an us-against-them mentality. Yet ethnic violence did not have to be an element of wartime life, even in relationships as problematic as those between Jews and non-Jews in Poland. The relationship between political integration and pogroms allowed for a wide range of variations across occupied Poland. If you lived, as a Jew, in a small town with an even smaller Jewish community, minimal political mobilisation for Zionists and Bundists and only a few inhabitants voting for the Nationalists (*Endejca*), your chances of avoiding a pogrom were relatively high. Perhaps, in places where such violence did occur, we historians have underestimated the power of decentralised and bottom-up violence that appears to be unorganised, which historians prefer to explain via somewhat atemporal categories such as seemingly centuries-old antisemitism. As Kopstein and Wittenberg show, these cases of intimate violence display, to say the least, certain patterns. Classic studies such as Christopher R. Browning’s *Ordinary Men* demonstrated that the reasons for killings are situational rather than cultural. Why not apply this framework to pogroms and other understudied cases of substate violence, such as the activities of Soviet partisans or armed resistance against the Nazi occupiers?

Two complementary paths are thus open for historians of today. On the one hand, the state certainly did matter in the Holocaust, particularly its collapse in the areas of ‘double occupation’ (Timothy Snyder). Those were the bloodlands, where most of the killings fields were to be found, and the book is consistent with Snyder’s findings: state collapse allowed for the pogroms. On the other hand, regarding the small Ukrainian town of Buczacz and Jews in and around ghettos, Ömer Bartov and Evgeny Finkel recently illustrated how much small-scale studies with concerns far removed from state-centered actions and direct Nazi orders can help answer questions of violence, resistance and survival. The book under review speaks to both of these historiographical trends. Furthermore, the legacy of Jan T. Gross looms large. Most communities (91 per cent) never experienced a pogrom, most Poles never attacked their neighbours. One thorny question in Gross’s study focused on the
representativeness of Jedwabne within Nazi-occupied Poland. Gross once wrote that ‘there is no reason to single out Jedwabne as a place where relationships between Jews and the rest of the population during those twenty months of Soviet rule were more antagonistic than anywhere else’. At most, he specified a strong Polish conspiracy against the Jews and the shocking cruelty of the local Soviet Secret Police (NKVD). While following Gross in stressing Jedwabne’s extraordinary cruelty, Kopstein and Wittenberg demonstrate that the town was more politically polarised than most other localities. Unusually for the region, the town was devoid of a Belarusian minority, which left Poles and Jews face-to-face. Here, as in other towns, Poles had been more than a third likelier to vote for the nationalist Endecja.

In my opinion, the chief merit of the book lies in the refutation of certain persistent arguments that historians have advanced regarding the pogroms. Economic reasons, supposedly innate Polish anti-semitism and ethnic differences cannot account for their occurrence. As Kopstein and Wittenberg point out, looting is different from killing for the sake of looting. What scholars have termed the ‘myth of Judeo-Bolshevism’ (Żydokomuna), that is, presumed Jewish involvement in communism, is not reflected in either the electoral results or in the censuses. There is no observable relationship between inter-war votes for communist parties and the outbreak of pogroms. If pogroms were merely retaliation against Jewish-Soviet collaboration once the local Party officials and their administrations had left, other ‘collaborators’ would also have been targeted. All this does not deny that perpetrators may have had these ideas in mind when they committed and, later, attempted to justify their crimes. This also does not deny that anti-semitism was widespread among Poles and other ethnicities, but no factor can account for these events alone.

In a book with such ambitious goals and a bold interdisciplinary focus, any critique lends itself to a suggestion. To be sure, the most irritating aspects of this book for historians will be the big data used and the systematic explanation based on levels of political integration. This is a rather common distinction between the two disciplines: historians are, by training, keen on historical contingency and details. Can the election results of 1928 account for events more than a decade later? Comparative politics has shown that voting preferences may change quickly, and 1928 was a somewhat calm year for Polish Jews. One could also argue that Piłsudski’s inclusive politics held antisemitic votes at bay until 1935. Furthermore, Kopstein and Wittenberg admit that they ‘are not able to account for all the spatial variation of pogrom occurrence, nor do the numbers give us a concrete understanding of how the social and political background created the facilitating conditions for pogrom occurrence, how the pogroms unfolded, and why they sometimes did not occur even though they “should” have’. Rather than a fault of the book, this admission is an invitation for scholars to work more closely together (e.g. on Lithuania, p. 117). How many victims were killed in these 219 pogroms? Did a certain threshold exist, a level at which radicals’ calls for violent acts led to murder? How and when did eager nationalists
convince their fellow inhabitants to commit murder? Here, the main weakness of the book’s explanation appears: why were women and children killed when the most politicised inhabitants targeted first and foremost those Jewish citizens they believed would soon wield power over them? One would need to dwell far more on the actual process of the disintegration of the social tissue. To consider the opposite question, why and when did the murder stop? Why and how did the 1941 pogroms differ from the deadliest pogrom wave, which struck Poland in 1918–1920?

The greatest confusion for historians may arise from the absence of the Nazis in the analysis, following their minimal role in Gross’s Neighbours. Similarly, one would expect the authors to use the notion of cultural assimilation as an analytical tool, which Jewish studies, in particular, have emphasised since the 2000s. The argument regarding Orthodox Jews as the most visible targets who yet often avoided pogroms is well taken (p. 131), but I wonder to what extent assimilation may have saved lives through moral and communal solidarity. The presence of Nazi officials may have also incited locals to eagerly endorse their new masters, especially those who had survived NKVD prisons. Complementary research in German archives would confirm or modify these various episodes and reveal local points of juncture. (15) Regarding Jewish voices, it is regrettable that the authors did not include, as they admit, certain video testimonies from the USC Shoah Foundation. These could help us understand more clearly, at the local level, the settings of cultural assimilation and add the voices of survivors, which often disappear behind the numbers. (16) To be sure, this is an analytical book, not a narrative.

In the midst of the fiery reception of Neighbours, Jan T. Gross stated that the very nature of Holocaust studies consists of asking additional questions rather than accepting simplistic answers. (17) In this sense, Kopstein and Wittenberg have offered an excellent outline for more research. It is an innovative and elegant book. Given the violence that Neighbours provoked in 2001 (and Jan Grabowski’s Hunt for Jews in 2010), one can only congratulate Kopstein and Wittenberg for their courage in having continued to study the bloody summer of 1941. In the end, their thought-provoking analysis reminds us that respect for historical facts and the freedom of scientific research are not a part of the natural work environment, at least not in today’s Poland, which wallows in competitive suffering. One can only hope that original research, as illustrated in this book, may continue elsewhere. (18)

Notes

A full panorama would be a monograph in itself. The array includes books by Donald Bloxham, Jürgen Zimmerer, Timothy Snyder, Saul Friedländer, Christian Gerlach, Omer Bartov and others.


Charles King, ‘Can there be a political science of the Holocaust?’, *Perspectives on Politics*, 10, 2 (2012), 323-41.


The six voivodeships are Białystok, Polesie, Volhynia, Lviv, Stanisławów and Tarnopol.


Town Called Buczacz (New York, NY, 2018), p. 129–244; Evgeny Finkel, *Ordinary Jews: Choice and Survival During the Holocaust* (Princeton, NJ, 2017). It is telling that all four historians begin their analysis with the inter-war years.

(15) A promising starting point could be, for instance, the famous letter of ‘Franzl’, first debunked at the exhibition on the Wehrmacht in 1995. The soldier described to his loved ones left in Vienna, Austria, some of the Nazi atrocities, the massacres of Ukrainians by the NKVD and the local pogroms by Nazis and Poles. Federal Archives Freiburg (BA/MA), RW 4/V. 442A, 202.
(16) For the latest historical writing on the Kishinev pogrom on April 19 and 20, 1903, see Steven J. Zipperstein, *Pogrom: Kishinev and the Tilt of History* (London, 2018), which complements the literature on Russian pogroms that the authors cite p. 120–2.

**Author’s Response**

Jeffrey S. Kopstein, Jason Wittenberg

We are grateful to Jan Burzlaff for his cogent reading of *Intimate Violence*, and especially for the value he places, as an historian, on engagement with political science. One of the reasons we undertook our study is the hope that modern social science methods might help us resolve the contentious debate among historians about the roots and reasons for the pogroms that took place in the aftermath of the June 1941 German invasion of the Soviet Union. In so doing we want to improve our understanding of both the Holocaust and the broader roots of mass violence.

In his thoughtful and thorough review, Burzlaff makes a number of important observations that deserve comment. We respond to two of the most important.
First, Burzlaff raises a very good question about the book’s title, in particular the text after the colon where we characterize the pogroms as having occurred ‘on the eve’ of the Holocaust. Is this title misleading or in some way wrong? Burzlaff maintains the pogroms should be considered part of the Holocaust rather something separate from it or as a prelude to it, as the wording of the book’s title implies. This is an important question of conceptualization and periodization. Historians disagree on what, exactly, the Holocaust was, and therefore when it began. Did the Germans have to be involved? Did it include the many non-Jewish victims who perished? We give no explicit answer, in retrospect an oversight on our part. We welcome the opportunity to elaborate a little here.

We adopt the largely conventional understanding of the Holocaust (with capitalized H) as the largely successful execution of the plan to exterminate European Jewry. The question is whether the 1941 pogroms were a part of this plan. The evidence suggests not. As we note in the book, not all Jews who could have been targeted for violence were actually targeted. Indeed, the relative rarity of pogroms means that most Poles and Ukrainians in the eastern Polish borderlands were not pogrom perpetrators, and most Jews were not pogrom victims. If local populations did have a plan to kill all the Jews, they didn’t come close to succeeding.

But did the locals even have a plan? In other words, were the pogroms simply a failed attempt to eliminate the Jews? There are two reasons to doubt this. First, in summer 1941 even the Germans, arguably, did not have a plan. The details would not be set in motion until the Wannsee conference in January 1942. Although it is true that in summer 1941 the Germans were encouraging local populations to engage in ‘self-cleansing’ actions, they were by no means forcing the issue, and they met with only mixed success.

Second, if the pogroms were a part of the Holocaust we would expect to observe attempted pogroms across most if not all of the nearly 2,000 communities in our sample in which Jews dwelled with non-Jews. But we don’t see that. Only certain communities were targeted. These featured Jewish communities that had been mobilized into their own nation-building project, primarily by way of Zionism, prior to the outbreak of war. For ethnic Poles and Ukrainians these places represented nodes of resistance to their aspirations for nation-states in which their respective languages and cultures would be hegemonic. This emboldened the perpetrators and made it less likely that those Poles and Ukrainians not directly involved in the violence would offer the Jews a refuge.

Was there genocidal intent at least in those places where pogroms did occur? In other words, were the other pogroms similar to Gross’s (2001) account of what happened in Jedwabne, where those Jews who did not succeed in escaping were murdered? The evidence for answering this question is sparse, primarily because the overwhelming majority of Jews who managed to avoid a pogrom ended up being killed by other means. The book shows that Jedwabne was an unusual community in that Poles who sympathized with the National Democrats faced off against
nationalist Jews, without the presence of other national groups. As for the other pogroms, we cannot say whether those who survived did so because they managed to escape an otherwise genocidal episode, or whether there was no genocidal intent to begin with. We do know that pogroms like Jedwabne were not the norm.

In short, the 1941 pogroms are better seen as one of the last instances of ‘traditional’ anti-Jewish violence, albeit in a more brutal version, than an early salvo in what we would later term the Holocaust. Burzlaff asks another crucial and related question: ‘why were women and children killed when the most politicized inhabitants targeted first and foremost those Jewish citizens they believed would soon wield power over them? One would need to dwell far more on the actual process of the disintegration of the social tissue’.

We agree with Burzlaff’s tentative answer to the question he poses, and touch upon it in the book. Social disintegration in the territories under study occurred primarily during the two years of Soviet occupation prior to the outbreak of war, when Moscow imposed its control and sought to root out any potential opposition. Civil society was crushed and there were deportations. No ethnic group was spared. Society was brutalized, lowering the threshold for ‘acceptable’ violence once the Soviet regime melted away after the German invasion of the Soviet Union.

How this led to the targeting of women and children involves another factor: the dynamics of individual pogroms. As we argue, pogroms occurred where Jews were already perceived as outside the circle of solidarity. The ritual humiliations that accompanied pogroms made matters worse. These humiliations featured anti-Semitic, anti-Communist, and anti-Zionist (‘Jewish nationalist’) elements, which inflamed both perpetrators and onlookers. Violence is most likely to spin out of control where perpetrators feel impunity and victims are helpless and seen as unworthy of sparing.

We do have a quibble with Burzlaff’s characterization of our argument. We do not claim that nationalist Jews would ‘wield power’ over the non-Jewish citizenry. Jews comprised only around ten percent of the population at the national level, and were a minority in most of the localities where pogroms occurred. As briefly noted above, non-Jewish locals saw Jews who insisted that their national rights be respected as a challenge to their goal of creating nationally homogeneous nation-states. Burzlaff suspects that historians will be confused by the absence of Nazis in the analysis. But we intentionally focused on violence in which Germans did not play a starring role. For the Nazis Eastern European Jews were an undifferentiated mass to be eliminated. Local variations only mattered insofar as they posed temporary obstacles to the ultimate goal. But the same cannot be said for the 1941 pogroms. Each of those places had its own backstory and that backstory determined how the events unfolded. We suspect this is true not only for the 1941 pogroms but perhaps also for certain aspects of the Holocaust and other cases of mass violence.