On the Persistence of Moral Judgment: Local Perpetrators in Transnistria as Seen by Bystanders

Vladimir Solonari

Work in Progress: Copyright. Please do not cite without the author’s consent.

The study of collaboration and perpetration of crimes against humanity by the local residents in Nazi-occupied Europe made substantial progress in the past years, largely due to the efforts of scholars from many countries working on previously classified Soviet-era archival documents. Nevertheless, one renowned historian recently questioned the very usefulness of such research, arguing that local helpers of Nazis and their allies had very little choice of whether to participate in crimes against humanity or not. Their behavior was, as he put it, “just as predictable as obedience to the authority”; and, as such, it requires “less (not more) explanation.”¹ Two other scholars in a recent prize-winning article argued that local Christians who lived under the Soviet rule in 1918-1939, under the axis power’s occupation demonstrated a rather sympathetic attitude towards the persecuted Jews. Diana Dumitru and Carter Johnson attributed this phenomenon, which they studied on the material coming from Transnistria, a Romania-occupied part of southern Ukraine, to the lasting effects of Soviet reeducation campaign meant to disabuse Soviet citizens of anti-Semitic prejudices as well as changing social patterns during the Soviet decades, in particular increased inter-ethnic interaction and mixed marriages.² These theses can be seen as


² See Diana Dumitru, Carter Johnson, “Constructing Interethnic Conflict and Cooperation: Why Some People Harmed Jews and Others Helped Them during the Holocaust in Romania” in World Politics, Volume 63, Number 1,
mutually supportive. If indeed local Christians were, in their majority, Jews-friendly, then local perpetrators appear as unrepresentative of the local population and possibly isolated from them. As such, they may have been victims themselves of Nazis and their allies. If they performed their grisly tasks, they quite possibly did so under duress, simply because they were obedient to the authority and were afraid of the occupiers, as Timothy Snyder obviously implied.

In contradistinction to these views I would argue that, first, local perpetrators were not automatons thoughtlessly carrying out their superiors’ orders. They were human beings who chose to become local policemen under orders of an occupying power’s authorities. Second, their participation in anti-Jewish campaigns, typically involving convoysing Jews to the places of internment and their guarding them there, as well as often taking part in mass shootings and robbery of their possessions, was not completely involuntary. Local perpetrators had an option not to murder and/or plunder, without a risk of life-threatening punishment. If they did not opt out, that was because they decided not to. Third, perpetrators were distinguished by the degrees of their inhumanity: brutality, sadistic inclinations, and boundless greed, on the one pole, and occasional mercy and empathy on the other. Fourth, all of this was obvious to both victims and bystanders, who constantly evaluated individual perpetrators’ behavior. On-lookers, in particular, weighed them according to the moral norms of local communities to which all of them belonged and often made their views known to the perpetrators.

I came to these conclusions on the basis of a year-long research in the archival collections of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC and Yad Vashem, Jerusalem which contain numerous copies of investigative files of persons who in the aftermath of World War II

were charged by the Soviet authorities of war crimes and, in their great majority convicted and sentenced. All in all, I researched more than 150 individual files on perpetrators from Transnistria, some of them containing many volumes devoted to different persons. In spite of the vexed problem of the reliability of investigative files created by the regime notorious for its practice of manipulating justice system for political ends, I believe that these files are mostly reliable and their careful reading can yield precious and otherwise unobtainable information. Additional information comes from other archival collections, mostly created by the Romanian occupying authorities as well as testimonies of survivors, with which I worked in Washington, DC, Jerusalem, and Chisinau, Moldova.

Since I am not in a position to sufficiently develop each of the four listed above theses, I will content myself with the following two observations. As far as motivations which likely drove perpetrators are concerned, I found myself in complete accord with the views expressed by Christopher Browning to which he came as a result of his multi-year research of German and (mostly) Ukrainian perpetrators, to wit that perpetrators could be divided into three categories: eager ideologically motivated killers, who volunteered for murderous assignments; conformists, who “undertook whatever task they were assigned,” and “evaders” who shirked the “duty” to kill usually by pretending they were “too weak” to do so rather than by invoking moral arguments. Browning believed that both the first and the second group were minorities while conformists comprised a clear majority. As he put it, “A core of eager and committed men, aided by an even larger block of men who complied with the policy of the regime… [without an] overt ideological

---

3 These files come from Galuzevyi Derzhavnyi Archiv Sluzhby Bezpeki Ukrainy (GDASBU), former KGB.
4 For example, delo 13189 (USHMM RG-25.018M reel 17) has 25 volumes devoted to members of Selbstschutz militia in the county of Berezovca (see below).
conviction, was sufficient to commit genocide." This begs the question of wherefrom ideologically committed perpetrators were coming, if one accepts as proven Dumitru’s and Johnson’s claim that the Soviet regime was utterly successful in its quest to reeducate Transnistrian population according to the precept of Marxist-Leninist internationalism. My answer to this question is that there is enough evidence that at least some of the perpetrators, and more often than not those who were put by the Romanians in the position of authority, were indeed motivated by deeply-ingrained anti-Semitic views. This was the case, for example of Dmitrii Zhuk, police chief in Domanevka raion of Transnitria who used to brag that he single-handedly executed 4000 Jews. According to Zhuk’s own confession to another defendant, he served in Semyon Petliura’s army in 1918-1919. According to an eyewitness, Zhuk used to refer to his service in the police as his personal crusade against “Communists and Jews.” He would put it like this: “I used to smash them back then [meaning, kill Jews while serving in the Petliura army], I smash them now.”

To this it should be added that a considerable group of perpetrators consisted of those who were themselves, or had their close relatives, repressed by the Soviet regime, as kulaks, saboteurs, or for other reasons, and joined the police in order to avenge their suffering on those whom they saw as responsible for it. To some extent this was a self-selected group, since these people often volunteered for the service in local police, but it should equally be borne in mind that Romanian occupying authorities sought persons of this category out and preferred to put them in the position of authority at the local level, understandably considering them as the most disposed to

---

6 Ibid., p. 75.
7 Eyewitness Vasilii Mokriak, GDASBU delo 5776, l. 240 USHMM RG-31.018M reel 22. Zhuk admitted to have participated in the massacre of “only” 500. Ibid., Delo 11512 l. 28.
8 See ibid., Delo 11512 ll. 93-94 (Ivan Kolos) reel 23. Zhuk insisted that he did not serve in that army but his uncle killed in 1924 or 1925 did. See ibid., l. 86.
9 Ibid., ll. 84-85 (Afanasii Nagornyai).
10 GDASBU delo 11512, ll. 93-94 (Ivan Kolos) USHMM RG-31.018M reel 23.
collaborate with them.\textsuperscript{11} Harboring strong resentment against the Soviet regime and being particularly exposed to the occupiers’ anti-Semitic propaganda, these policemen quickly accepted identification of all Jews with the regime they so strongly hated.\textsuperscript{12} Since they could not kill those Soviet activists or functionaries whom they identified as directly responsible for their suffering – either because these people had evacuated in the Soviet Union’s interior, had been conscripted in the Red Army or because, although they chose to stay in the occupied territories, Romanians treated them rather leniently and did not allow their murder, sometimes even putting them back in the managerial positions - these perpetrators vented their resentment on Jews as proxies for their tormentors.\textsuperscript{13}

But how representative were policemen of the local population, how widespread was the support for the persecution of Jews among local Ukrainians? Investigators files and other archival materials that I consulted allow a few glimpses in the mindset of the local population not directly involved in the persecution of Jews. To begin with, Romanian gendarmerie reports often mention local Christian population’s discontent due to the “placement” of Jews in concentration camps close to their locales, mostly due to the increase in prices on basic food and other

\textsuperscript{11} For example, Gendarmerie Legion of Dubăsari județ request from April 1942 to be provided with or be allowed to recruit informers from among dekulakized persons, as the most reliable among the local population. See DANIC IGJ dosar 122/1942 f. 306 USHMM RG-25.010M reel 16). In September 1943, Gendarmerie Legion in Odessa județ reported that those who suffered [persecution] at the hands of the Soviets “and currently occupy responsible positions [in the administration and management] are terrified by the prospects of the Bolsheviks’ return and request permission to be evacuated with Romanian troops.”(See DANIC IGJ dosar 83/1943 f. 199 USHMM RG-25.010M reel 26).

\textsuperscript{12} This mechanism of displacement of resentment against the Soviets by an ideological anti-Semitism is persuasively explained by Roger D. Petersen. See his Understanding Ethnic Violence: Fear, Hatred, and resentment in Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), esp. 95-136.

\textsuperscript{13} Former Soviet activists and functionaries identified as such by the occupiers were required to register with local authorities but otherwise were allowed to live under the police supervision, virtually unmolested. See GDASBU arkh. nomer 4730, l. 19v USHMM RG-31.018M reel 23 and ibid., 3809, l. 56v and Information Summary Report of Moghilev Gendarme Legion, March 1943 in DANIC IGJ dosar 80/943, f. 4 USHMM RG-25.010M reel 26. On the supervision of former communists working in managerial positions see, for example, DANIC IGJ 122/1942, f. 134 USHMM RG-25.10M reel 16 (information report of the Gendarmerie Legion of Berezovca județ, Transnistria, April 1942). On the population’s discontent with this situation and idem f. 298 (information report of the Gendarmerie Legion of Balta județ, Transnistria, March 1942).
necessities it produced. In November 1941, General Sub-Inspectorate of Gendarmerie in Transnistria informed its superiors in Bucharest that Ukrainian population in such areas had a very negative and aggressive attitude to the Jews there: “when they meet them, they beat and take clothes off them, after which they let them go.” This report even claimed that “an order was issued to guarantee life and personal belongings of those [Jews] interned in ghettos and camps.” Intelligence report of the 3rd Army deployed in Transnistria, in December 1941 also stated that local Ukrainian population was “very dissatisfied” with the “placement” of Jews in concentration camps which led to the dearth of products and added that the situation of Jews interned in camps was critical because local Christians “refused to accept them and offer them any help.” Army Intelligence report from the district of Balta in January 1942 ascertained that while the decision to remunerate Jews interned in the camps for the (forced) labor they were assigned to do “produced a great satisfaction” among the latter, local Christians “were bewildered as to the reasons for this decision wondering whether it was not somehow due to the Soviet offensive.” As the local reactions to the pitiful site of convoys of Jews marching to the Bug river, the report noted that “The local population rejoice seeing [them] and believes that this exodus is a heavily punishment for the deeds they committed.” When it turned out that not all Jews were done in during mass murder campaigns in the fall of 1941 – spring of 1942, local population, according to the information collected by the Tulchin district gendarme legion in

---

15 AMAN Fond Fond Armata a 3-a Inventar N S/6776 din 1976, dosar 410, f. 33 USHMM RG-25.003M reel 17.
16 Ibid., ff. 119-120.
17 Ibid., f. 340.
18 Ibid., 372.
June 1942, grew dissatisfied with what they saw as Romanian indecisiveness unfavorably contrasting it with more resolute German way of “treating” Jews.\(^{19}\)

It might be argued that the gendarmes’ and army troops’ own Antisemitism blinded them to the diversity of opinions with the local population and they accepted their local informers’ rants as representative of the majority of the locals. But this is not exactly correct since the gendarmes and army intelligence officers did register cases of baptism of Jews, performed in a desperate attempt to avoid death, with local Christian Orthodox priests officiating (this practice was forbidden by the authorities), as well as cases of local Christian families adopting Jewish children, sometimes in exchange of “considerable sums.”\(^{20}\) The number of likewise cases was however not high enough to cause alarm with the authorities, and in any event the Jews baptized in this way were still treated as Jews while many children adopted by the locals were shortly afterwards denounced to the local police by their neighbors, and arrested by them, never to be heard of again.\(^{21}\)

It thus appears that the gendarmes’ and army intelligence’s assessment of the local Christians’ attitude towards Jews was close enough to reality. Indeed, post-war investigative files also contain enough evidence suggesting outright hostile or indifferent bordering to hostility attitude

---

\(^{19}\) DANIC, Fond IGJ, dosar 124/1942, f. 168 USHMM RG-25.010M reel 17.

\(^{20}\) On baptism see AMAN Fond Fond Armata a 3-a Inventar N S/6776 din 1976, dosar 410, f. 372 USHMM RG-25.003M reel 17. On the adoption of Jewish children for money see army intelligence note of November 19, 1941 in ibid., f. 49.

\(^{21}\) On the use of “Russians” (meaning probably Russian-speaking Christians) in Odessa to identify and detain hiding Jews and “camouflaged” Jewish children see marginal note (in effect, instruction) written on the proposal of the commander of the 1\(^{st}\) Brigade Fortifications General Petrescu to more widely involve Russian population and in particular those who worked as army intelligence’s undercover agents and who, the general believed, were particular interested in the removal of Jews in AMAN Fond Brigada 1 Fortificații dosar 399, ff. 435-436 USHMM RG-25.003M reel 394. On the cases involving arrest and subsequent “disappearance” of Jewish children initially adopted by local Christian families see, e.g., GDA USB arh. # 13153, l. 181v. YV JM-19.763; ibid., arh. # 012919, l. 56v YV JM-23.504. GDA USB delo 4603, ll. 19-19v, 26-26v USHMM RG-31.018M reel 19.
of the locals towards the suffering of Jews, including their mass murder. Particularly informative are accounts of eyewitnesses of massacres in Bogdanovka in December 1941-January 1942. Mass murder of up to 60,000 Jews was carried out by a rather small group of a little more than 70 policemen from the city of Pervomaisk, as well as outlying Ukrainian and German villages. Local policemen from the village itself stood in encirclement while many residents from the village were involved in bringing exhausted Jews found in the nearby locales to the place of execution in their horse-carts, transporting German and Romanian officers who attended execution (without directly participating in it), as well as straw and hay used in pyres to burn their corpses, providing with transportation means, etc. As transpires from witnesses’ accounts, people in the village were fully aware of what was going on in their immediate vicinity but preferred, in their great majority, to look another way.

No less informative are accounts of the plunder of Jewish victims’ belongings. As a rule, Jews were ordered to undress before the massacres and following it their clothes and jewelry were divided among their slaughterers. There is abundant evidence that such loot was very attractive for executioners and constituted a serious incentive for participation in shooting parties. Jewish things then were brought home and, as a rule, given by executioners to their wives for washing, ironing, and sometimes altering to suit the needs of members of family or to be sold in the markets. In the war-torn region with impoverished population and virtually complete unavailability of newly-sewn clothes these things represented important sources of revenue. Since washing was followed by drying those things up, usually on the lines in the open spaces in front of the houses, the whole villages would become aware not only of the fact of plunder but

---

22 See esp. detailed account of Ivan Latii in GDU SBU delo 13189 tom 22, ll. 216-230.
23 See Eric Steinhardt,
also of its extent and the quality of the booty. There are many accounts of perpetrators bragging to each other and their neighbors of their booty, as well as of their wives reproaching them for the low-quality of their pickings. To cite just one particularly obnoxious example, Roman Garrecht, member of the Volksdeutsche Selbstschutz militia in the village of Neue Amerika, deposited how after the shooting of hundreds of Jews in the village of Podoliaka in Berezovca county in February of 1942, their commander assisted by two other policemen sorted Jewish belongings putting them in different bundles, and then put signs on each assigning it to this or that killer. Garrecht brought his bundle home, and his wife washed its content. There, she found golden watch sewn in one jacket. He picked that watch up, put it on, and bragged about it to other policemen. However, the next day they showed up at his house and requisitioned it from him, on the order of their boss, saying that it was forbidden to appropriate gold.25 Christian Schwab told similar story, except that in his case after his golden watch was confiscated, the militia commander Adam Frölich presented a replacement to him: big Moscow-made watch which Swab repaired and then wore.26 While killers would select the best clothes for themselves, they would often invite local residents to help themselves to the rest of the booty. For example, eyewitness Efrosin’ia Alferova from the village of IAstrebinova, Berezovca county, who gaped at the sight of murder of 1750 Jews (Romanian data) in March 1942, testified that the policemen brought Jewish things to the village school at where they were picked up by the mayor and “others” whom she supposedly did not know.27

25 GDA SBU arh. # 13153, tom 33, ll. 381-382 YV JM-19.762. According to Soviet State Extraordinary Commission to Investigate Nazis’ and their Allies crimes (CHGK), in the vicinity of this village Selbstschutz militia, with the assistance of local policemen, shot 400 Jews in February 1942. See GARF Fond 7021 Opis’ 68 delo 178, l. 205-206 YV JM—19.716. The number however could be high, up to 600, as one eyewitness deposited. See GDA SBU arh. # 13153 tom 31, l. 388 YV JM-19.762.

26 GDA SBU arh. # 13153 tom 10, l. 64 YV JM-19.765.

27 GDA SBU arh. # 13153 tom 17 ll. 255-269м YV JM-19.763. Romanian gendarmerie legion’s relation on the shooting in Iastrebinovo (which they attributed, mendaciously, to Selbstschutz only since local policemen, who also
It should be borne in mind that deportations, internment, and mass shooting of Jews took place in the initial phase of Romanian’s domination of Transnistria when, according to all available Romanian sources, local were still positively disposed to the new masters, were inclined to believe their rhetoric of “liberation from the Bolshevik yoke” and promises of better life under the supposedly civilized and benevolent Romanian rule. Since the same sources later would acknowledge the change of attitude to the more and more negative and even outright hostile towards the Romanians, there is a reason to accept their assessment of the local population’s moods. Unfortunately for historians, these sources keep either complete silence over the massacres which were perpetrated by the Ukrainian police under orders of Romanian gendarmerie (such as in Dumanevka and Bogdanovka) and mention only matter-of-factly those in which primary culprits were Volksdeutsche Selbstschutz members, they do not expound on the attitude of local Christians towards those events. But both the positive attitude of the majority of the locals towards their new masters and complete scarcity of evidence of their protests over the execution of horrendous mistreatment and execution of Jews which were happening before their very eyes make it very likely that anti-Semitic message of German and Romanian propaganda did resonate among local Christians who in their majority were indifferent or even hostile to suffering Jews. Local mayors and policemen, people who were called upon to implement anti-Jewish policy of the occupiers, far from being outcasts of the local communities, likely were representative of a substantial part of the local population, especially in the initial phase of the occupation, and anti-Jewish measures were not met with universal opprobrium.

Nevertheless, it is indeed true, as Dumitru and Johnson stated, that a part of local Christians supported Jews, tried to hide them, gave them food and otherwise assisted them in their efforts to

\[\text{took part, were subordinated to gendarmerie and acknowledge their role would tantamount to letting Romanian complicity) see in DANIC IGJ dosar 122/1942, ff. 2-4 USHMM RG-25.010M reel 16.}\]
survive the time of persecution. Many survivors did indeed mention this fact with gratitude, sometimes talking about (generalized) “wonderful people” from among the locals to whom they owed their survival. But it is equally correct that other survivors emphasized, in their testimonies, their loneliness, lack of support from, and indifference of the locals.28

That said, morality was not completely extinguished among the local Christians. Besides attempts to help or save individual Jews, sometimes successful but more often failed, investigative files mention instances of local Christians’ censuring the killers’ brutality and shaming them for the outrage they commit. Sometimes perpetrators wives’ are mentioned scolding their husbands for bringing home clothes of murdered Jews, and perpetrators being mindful of their spouses’ possible disapproval for their murderous activity. Only rarely did such reproaches, if they did indeed take place, resulted in perpetrators mending their ways, as for example happened with Joseph Rötler, against whom, according to his own deposition, his own wife lashed out so severely that he eventually requested release from service in Selbstschutz and managed to obtain one, in spite of his boss’s initial reluctance (Rötler claimed poor health).29

More often perpetrators’ initial worries as to their spouses’ negative reaction did not materialize, or the latter, even if initially reacting negatively, eventually did select some items for themselves and wore them publicly.30

People outside of perpetrators immediate families were also sometimes remembered as attempting to shame them for their crimes. For example, Liudmila Gild (in marriage, Zerr)

28 Cf., for example, Aron Ostrovskii, survivor of Zhmerinka ghetto: “Seldom, very seldom somebody from the local Ukrainians could dare to hide a Jew in his house. We, the Jews, were on this and, in our native city, pariahs, although we lived friendly with everybody before the war.” See USHMM 1995 A. 1029 # 863.
29 See GDA SBU arh. # 13153 tom 12, l. 142 YV JM-19.767. This version seems to be substantiated by another eyewitness who however attributed Rötler’s release to his marriage to a Russian woman, see ibid., tom 28, l. 121 YV JM-19.762.
30 Alexander Jonus, GDA SBU delo 13189 tom 6, ll. 94-95 USHMM RG-32.018M reel 17 and GDA SBU arh. # 13153 tom 10, ll. 60, 147-149 YV JM-19.764.
recounted how she used to admonish Jakob Gertner for taking part in the murder of Jews, and the latter every time denied him doing so and insisted that he was “only” convoying them to the site of execution.31 Ekaterina Vezner (Wessner?), an ethnic German who since before the war resided and worked as a teacher in a local school in the Ukrainian village of Stepanovka, once, in the early 1942, heard screams of Jews whom she sheltered in the school. She ran from her room which she rented in the school’s building, and saw Selbstschutz member Peter Scheel, whom she knew from before some time, plundering their possessions. Vezner verbally assailed him for this villainy, although apparently to no avail (not only did Scheel continue robbing Jewish victims but he also later took part in many executions).32 In the village of Vradievka, where Romanian gendarmes carried out mass executions of Jews in the fall of 1941, local women, according to the eyewitness Efrosin’ia Cherniavskaia, yelled at gendarme (private first class) Constantin Munteanu for tormenting Jews. Cherniavskaia herself screamed that that had his mother known what he was doing in Transnistria, she would not let him back in Romania, to which Munteanu answered that they had not killed enough of them, yet.33

Some locals were also remembered as being overwhelmed by grief and horror at the sight of massacre of so many innocent people. As Ida Shul’man, whose family was spared execution because the mayor of the village Bogdanovka selected them as craftsmen necessary for the local community (they were shoemakers), recounted, a Ukrainian man, Fedorenko, in whose hut they were staying at the time of massacre, thusly expressed his feeling regarding the butchery: “Those skunks, they shot a whole lot of people!” (Skol’kih liudei postreliali, gady!).34 Safran Cholovskiim, an eyewitness from Bogdanovka, recalled that another local resident, Ivan

---

31 See GDA SBU arh. # l. 13153 tom 21, l. 130 YV JM-19.765.
33 GDA SBU, delo 5776, l. 204 USHMM RG- 32.018M reel 22.
34 GDA SBU, delo 13189 tom 20, l. 194 USHMM RG-32.018M reel 18.
Graчaл, who happened to have seen the scene of execution, had that to say: “What a disaster, a horrible sight.” (Beda, strashno smotret’). This generalized “disaster” may imply the view of the event as an incomprehensible catastrophe, akin to the blind play of natural forces which can be neither understood nor averted. But it can also suggest that Granchak saw it an omen presaging things even worse to come, possibly as a punishment to the land where such crimes were allowed to happen.

These findings cannot be summed up in a simplistic formula. The population of Transnitria was not philosemitic but neither did it consist of willing Jew-killers. Initially, the majority of the local Christians was ready to give the occupiers the benefit of the doubt and hoped that their rule would be better than the depredations of communism. An active minority sought to use the moment to settle their scores with communist supporters on the local level and accepted the occupiers’ identification of Jews with communism at its face value. Some of the people of this category were put in the position of authority at the local level and led executioners’ squads. Other would-be perpetrators joined them out of opportunism, conformism and/or greed. These people were not outcasts and there quite possibly existed substantial support for their views, although not necessary to their actions.

But compassion and empathy did not completely disappear. The plight of suffering women, children, and older people was too much for some. While the majority, perplexed and preoccupied with their own survival, looked another way when Jews were trudging to their death, some offered help, usually as long as it did not threaten their and their families’ well-being, still others privately or publicly expressed their outrage to the perpetrators over their actions. While it saved but a fraction of Jewish lives destined to perdition, and had no bearing on

35 GDA SBU arh. # 13153 tom 16, l. 205 YVJM-19.763.
the occupiers’ policy, those who received the support they desperately needed remembered it with gratitude to the end of their lives. As to the posterity, the very fact of survival of moral judgment under the most catastrophic of circumstances imaginable offers a feeble hope in the brighter side of human nature.
Vladimir Solonari is associate professor of history at the University of Central Florida. He received his PhD in history from Moscow State University in 1986. His book, Purifying the Nation: Population Exchange and Ethnic Cleansing in Nazi-Allied Romania, was published by Woodrow Wilson Center Press in cooperation with Johns Hopkins University Press in 2010. He is the author of a number of articles on Romanian, Moldovan, and Soviet history. His current research focuses on the social history of southwestern Ukraine under the Romanian occupation during World War II.