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The Religious Dimension of the First Antisemitic Violence in Eastern Galicia (June–July 1941): Manifestations and interpretations

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Abstract: This article deals with the religious dimension of the violence against the Jews in Eastern Galicia at the start of Operation Barbarossa (the invasion of the Soviet Union by Nazi Germany on June 22, 1941), in June–July 1941. It examines the context of the various attacks, such as the burning of synagogues, the public persecutions of devout Jews, in addition to the verbal insults, especially by priests instigating the local population against their Jewish neighbors. The paper looks at the political use of these narratives, as well as their consequences and justifications.

Keywords: Holocaust, pogroms, religion, Eastern Galicia

The first bouts of violence against the Jews in Eastern Galicia were numerous and intense. From Lviv to the small villages nestled in the Carpathians, the Jews of the region were the main civilian targets of the first weeks of Operation Barbarossa, launched on June 22, 1941. The violence took various forms: organized killings, pogroms, isolated murders, lootings, rapes, public humiliations, and round-ups. Recent work on the topic has shown that a wide range of players took part in the actions: commandos from the *Einsatzgruppe*¹ C, soldiers from the Wehrmacht and other foreign military units, Ukrainian committees, as well as the local population. They murdered about 20,000 Jews in the first 4 weeks of the invasion. Historians provided detailed accounts of the events (Pohl 1997; Struve 2015), in-depth studies concentrating on Lviv (Himka 2011; Mick 2015), and other important settlements, such as Bouchach (Bartov 2018), and Berezhany (Redlich 2002). The political

1 Action groups.

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motivations, especially the agreements between the OUN-B² and Hitler, were analyzed revealing a widespread local support for pogroms and executions. The socio-economic revenge has also been explored to a certain extent (Bauer 2005). Several local factors contributed to the extermination of the Jews in the East by Nazi Germany (some of which are well known), but the religious aspect deserves more attention. The first violence committed against the Jews in Eastern Galicia are characterized by a complex intertwining of the want to destruct Jews and Judaism, and the goal to annihilate the “Judeo-Bolshevik” Soviet Union.

In *The Years of Persecution*, Saul Friedländer (1998, 73–112) analyzed the ideological factors driving the Nazi anti-Semitic policy. He explored the redemptive aspect of Hitler’s obsessive and almost mystical anti-Semitism dedicated to saving the world by eliminating the Jews. In other countries the extermination policy was supported by both, the political and spiritual elites. Friedländer places Hitler at the center of the Jews’ extermination policy, more precisely the annihilation of the Jews of the East. In Vienna, Hitler encountered the “*Ostjuden*”,³ which was decisive in his depiction and demonization of the Jews. In 2011, Alon Confino (2011) wrote a significant book titled *A World Without Jews: The Nazi Imagination from Persecution to Genocide* on the Nazi representations of the religious Jews, and explained why the Nazis felt compelled to destroy the religion of the Bible. More importantly, he emphasized the imperative of religious eradication as a justification for *Kristallnacht*⁴ (Confino 2011).

During the first 3 weeks of Operation Barbarossa, synagogues were burned, holy books were destroyed, and religious Jews were humiliated and publicly tortured. In parallel with this overt destruction of the Jewish religion, the – mostly Greek Catholic – priests incited their followers to participate in the violence against the Jews. The religious dimension in these acts of persecution raises questions: Do these manifestations mimic previous practices, such as the pogroms, the *Kristallnacht* or the Polish campaign of 1939? Or, are they symptoms of a more radical turn in the elimination of the Jews of the East? The religious dimension deserves attention, as it is less obvious thereafter. One possible explanation is that the Jewish religion had been less prevalent in the Soviet territories during the 1920s and 1930s because priests and rabbis had been persecuted and driven out. However, in Lithuania, and

² Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists-Bandera: Ukrainian political unit tied to Stepan Bandera.

³ *Ostjuden* was used to refer to the Eastern European Jews, who were distinguished from the assimilated European Jews. They were perceived to dress and behave differently from the locals.

⁴ The Night of Broken Glass, also called November Pogroms against Jews by paramilitary groups as well as the German population took place in Nazi Germany on November 9, 1938.

other formerly Polish regions, such as Eastern Galicia or Volhynia, the religious dimension was not significant, and it appeared only during the subsequent deportations or shootings.

Nevertheless, the intentions behind the attempts of destroying expressions of Judaism deserve attention. The aim of this article is to observe how the persecution of the Jewish religion in Eastern Galicia was linked to the issues of Operation Barbarossa in the first weeks. The Nazi policy launched the extermination of the Jews in the East by involving a large number of actors. These persecutions took place along with an intense propaganda to justify the war of annihilation against the Soviet Union, too.

First, I will address the attacks on synagogues and Jewish religious symbols by questioning their continuity, and then, I will analyze the *Ostjud* as an emblematic and practical figure of the enemy. Finally, I will explore the religious and the political aspects of the violence against the sacred paraphernalia.

1 Attacks Against Synagogues and Jewish Religious Symbols

The *Kristallnacht* that began on the night of November 9–10, 1938, was a landmark event of Nazism. Starting that night, hundreds of synagogues were burned across the Reich. According to Wolfgang Benz (1998), the events marked a turning point, which he describes as a return to barbarism: “(...) in one night, the achievements of the Enlightenment, emancipation, the concept of the rule of law and the idea of individual freedom have been undermined (...). In November 1938, it was clear to the Jews of Germany (...) that civil rights and laws no longer applied to them” (Benz 1998, 499). The aggression against the synagogues also had a symbolic and religious significance: the Reich attacked the foundations of Judaism and reproduced the burning of the Temple in 70 in a number of cities. The desecration of places of worship was accompanied by actions aimed at publicly humiliating Jews. On November 10, 1938, in Baden-Baden, 80 Jews were forced to march through the city in a procession to the synagogue, uncover their heads in the synagogue and chant the *Horst Wessel Lied*.⁵ A teacher from the Jewish community was ordered to read the *Mein Kampf* aloud from the *bimah*.⁶ The synagogue was then burned down (Adams et al. 1998).

In September 1939, the German troops – the specific actors are unknown – had already distinguished themselves by destroying the synagogues in the North of Eastern Galicia, which they had briefly occupied. The synagogue in Yavoriv was bombed and dynamited. The Germans ordered the Ukrainian militiamen to seize the

5 The Nazi Party's anthem.

6 Raised platform in the synagogues from where the Torah is read.

prayer books and objects of worship from other houses of prayer and throw them into the burning synagogue. A Jewish survivor recalls, “the Nazis suddenly took out a microphone and pressed the Jews to declare that they themselves had set fire to their synagogue. The Germans mocked them, ridiculed them, yodeled: ‘Wo ist dein rache Gott?’”⁷ (Druck 1950, 3–4). The German invasion coincided with the Jewish holidays of *Rosh Hashana* and *Yom Kippur*, giving the Nazi desecrations an even more blasphemous character. According to Alexander Rossino’s study, murders and the burning of synagogues were the main methods employed by the *Einsatzgruppe von Woysch* unit, whose mission was, it seems, to create a reign of terror among the Jewish population of Upper Silesia and Galicia in order to make them flee eastward. On September 8, 1939, the *Einsatzgruppe von Woysch* set fire to the Bedzin synagogue and murdered nearly a hundred Jews (Rossino 2001, 39). Synagogues, prayer books, and Torah scrolls were destroyed, mostly by fire. These devastations were sometimes accompanied by murders of Jews, as was the case in Dynow on September 14, similarly to other settlements further east on the road leading to Przemyśl, precisely on the itinerary of the *Einsatzgruppe von Woysch* (Struve 2015, p. 16).

The burning of the synagogues in Eastern Galicia happened around the same time as the *Kristallnacht* and the Polish campaign; however, the desecration of the synagogues took place over a longer period. In modern times, fortified synagogues were built in Sataniv or Medzhybizh to protect the Jewish population from Cossack attacks. The synagogues had been known to house precious objects, therefore they were regular targets of looting during the wars, such as the synagogue in Bouthach, which was later transformed into a church (Agnon 1956, 9; Bartov 2018, 33). Several synagogues had been desacralized in Belarus during the 1919–21 wave of pogroms (Rozin 1975–1985, 14). On December 5, 1927, in Bukovina, a city under Romanian rule then, the synagogue of Chernovtsy was destroyed and the Torah scrolls were taken to the main square in a procession, and burned during an autodafé. A congress of Romanian nationalist students ignited the powder, obviously with the blessing of the government. Twenty-five Jewish houses of worship were ransacked and destroyed during the Bucharest pogrom on January 21–23, 1941.

The sources documenting the burning of synagogues in Eastern Galicia during the summer in 1941 are incongruent. In 4 weeks, there were at least 20 Galician localities where the synagogues were either destroyed or desacralized (by torture or murder). The synagogues of Zbarazh,⁸ Rudki,⁹ Nyzhankovychi,¹⁰ Zhovkva¹¹ were

⁷ “Where is your God of revenge?”

⁸ GARF 7021-75-107.

⁹ GARF 7021-58-21.

¹⁰ Interview of Tarass K., on April 25, 2018, in Nyzhankovychi, Yahad – In Unum Archives, YIU/2420U.

¹¹ GARF 7021-67-79.

burned in the first hours after the arrival of German troops. The synagogues of Lviv,¹² Ternopil¹³ and Hrymaliv¹⁴ were destroyed during the pogroms.

In Zhovkva, the tragedy was avoided, but only narrowly. Before setting fire to it, German soldiers entered the synagogue with the intention to loot, destroy, and desecrate the religious objects. They took at least one photograph, probably as a souvenir (Figure 1).¹⁵ In the center of the picture, five German soldiers pose on the steps leading to the “*Aron Kodesh*”, the Holy Ark usually containing the Torah scrolls, the holiest place in a synagogue. Signs of the recent looting and destruction surround the soldiers: there are overturned desks, benches, and open drawers. The German soldiers are mocking the observant Jews, flouting, and ridiculing the sacred objects. The picture immortalizes a grotesque scene, an act of plunder in the center of a vandalized synagogue; after which the building was burnt down. Only at the interference of a German officer were a dozen Jews saved, whom the soldiers had allegedly wanted to throw into the flames.¹⁶ The figure of a providential individual opposed to a rowdy crowd during the pogroms comes up regularly in the narrative of the Jewish survivors.

The burning of a synagogue is an effective instrument of communication: a significant public event, which conveys an important message, importantly coinciding with the beginning of the German invasion of the Soviet Union. In July 1941, during the night of burning the synagogue in Kremenets, Germans fired shots at it and “performed the dance of the savages around it (Figure 2).”¹⁷ This is an obvious and visible manifestation of the fight against the Bolsheviks and the Jews. It is no longer a question of expelling the Jews, but a turning point in anti-Semitic policy: the synagogues are not only burned to deprive Jews of their places of worship, but to express their futility, because there would be no more Jews. The burning of a synagogue symbolically erases the Jewry. At this stage, the fire spreading over the entire territory acts as a dismal omen, illustrating the point of no return—in the same way the first shots were a point of no return in the pogroms carried out by the *Einsatzgruppen* and their local accomplices. In the *Ereignismeldung* (EM) UdSSR Nr. 20, dated July 12, 1941, the burning of the synagogue is depicted as an act of revenge: “On July 7, 1941, in Rudki, 15 Jews were executed in retaliation [als *Vergeltung*] for the bestial assassination of the Ukrainian nationalist leader Kirnychny. On the side of the

¹² Diary of Stanisław Różycki, on July 28, 1941, in Lviv, YVA M.10 AR 1/459.

¹³ GARF 7021-75-105.

¹⁴ GARF 7021-75-94.

¹⁵ Yad Vashem, Picture YVA 220101.

¹⁶ Gerson Taffet, *Vernichtung der Juden von Zolkiew*, BArch B162-2100, p. 80 sqq.

¹⁷ Diary of Roman Aleksandrovitch Kravtchenko, Kremenets, 07/26/1941, KRKM, LKM-i-8570/7695/1.



Figure 1: German soldiers in a synagogue in Zhovkva, June–July 1941, YVA 220AO1.

Ukrainian population, the synagogue and the Jewish houses were set on fire.”¹⁸ The report unsurprisingly sticks to the Nazi narrative: Jews are guilty of murder, therefore, Germans and Ukrainians murder Jews in retaliation. It should be noted that the execution carried out by the *Einsatzgruppe C* is distinguished from an alleged act of unbridled violence on the part of the local population. The arsonists of the synagogue have not been identified, but according to the Berlin report the events are related: Ukrainians oppressed by the Soviet system seemed to have naturally channeled their revenge against the local Jewry. A parallel was made in EM UdSSR Nr. 24 concerning the destruction of the Dobromyl synagogue, in retaliation for

18 EM UdSSR Nr.20, on July 12, 1941, in Berlin, BArch B162-433.



Figure 2: Ruins of a synagogue in Yavoriv, 1940s, YVA 3380-664

the corpses that had been discovered in the NKVD¹⁹ prison.²⁰ The Nazis burned Jews alive in the synagogues in Dobromyl, as in Velyki Mosty,²¹ or in Bialystok on June 27, 1941:

When the Germans entered the city, they caught men, women, children, old and young people and pushed everyone into the great synagogue. They locked them there, poured gasoline on all sides, as well as around the Beith-Hamidrash and the Belser Klose and set them on fire. Nothing remained of the synagogues and of the Jews (Greidinger 1964, 108–109). About 200 Jews perished there. (Altman 2009, 275)

The synagogue, a place of prayer and knowledge became a site of massacre. The German invaders respected neither the sanctity of the place nor those they threw into the flames.

Stanisław Różycki, a Jew from Warsaw living in Lviv at the time, witnessed the arrival of the Germans into Lviv and the anti-Semitic violence that ensued. Using his notes from Lviv, he recounted the events several weeks after they had happened.

19 People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, which conducted the political repression.

20 EM UdSSR Nr.24, on July 16, 1941, in Berlin, BArch B162-434.

21 Statement of Josef Rosenger, on August 3, 1947, in Gabersee bei Wasserburg, YVA M.21.1/92.

His diary was saved by the Emmanuel Ringelblum archiving company in the Warsaw ghetto. Rózycki puts forward another motivation for the burning of synagogues: to frighten the Jewish population and force them to pay the exorbitant 10 million rubles tribute demanded:

The five oldest and most beautiful synagogues were burned down during the night. Apparently in order not to interrupt the cycle, the series of successive persecution measures, so that there are no breaks, no idling occurs. The whole program follows a plan made in advance, it is systematic, under the protection of the fire brigade, so that the fire does not spread to other houses. The next day, the terms of the contribution were announced: 10 million rubles, the first installment within 3 days, 10 million over the next 3 days.²²

By burning synagogues, the Nazi authorities showed that they were capable of the worst. Rózycki wrote that the Nazis had threatened the Jews of Lviv with the fate of those in Bialystok (it is difficult to know whether this information was known in Lviv in July 1941, or if Rózycki added later, at the latest in the second half of 1941). Threatening was an instrument of pressure, but also a message. In 1938, in Baden-Baden, as in July 1941 in Kremenets or Rudki, the burning of synagogues was part of the Nazi theatrics fitting a well-defined narrative and a propaganda tool – a spectacle revealing their hubris. The attacks on the Jewish religious buildings went hand in hand with a practice of persecutions against visibly observant Jews and rabbis in the first weeks of the invasion.

2 The “Ostjuden”

In September 1939, and in June 1941, German soldiers and *Propagandakompanien* (ostjganda companies) took several pictures, showing German soldiers cutting the beards off of Orthodox Jews. Stripping a man's beard – by cutting or burning it – is nothing trivial. As the beard is a symbol of masculinity, to deprive a man of his facial hair is to deny him his virility. This humiliation echoes the practice of shaving women's heads. Practicing Jews followed the prescriptions of the Bible in Leviticus (19:27) forbidding trimming one's beard. Therefore, cutting a Jew's beard is an act aimed at trampling on his religious convictions in addition to taking away a part of his identity. The meaning is twofold: he is deprived of his status as a man, and as a believer.

The *Wehrmacht* soldiers and the members of the *Einsatzgruppen* recognized the Nazi propaganda's caricatures of the “*Ostjuden*” in the features of the Jews of the East. Christopher Browning explains that many young German soldiers saw the

22 Diary of Stanisław Rózycki, on July 28, 1941, in Lviv, YVA M.10 AR 1/459.

strange “*Ostjuden*” or the Eastern European Jews for the first time, who were substantially different from the assimilated German Jews and hitherto known primarily through the caricatures of Nazi propaganda (Browning 2007, 13). Jürgen Matthaüs perceived the Polish Jews as the personification of the Nazi caricature from the 1940 film, the “*Eternal Jew*” (Matthaüs 2007, 249). Bogdan Musiał brings in the aspect of the “*Ostjuden*’s” look, which makes them easily and quickly identifiable targets among the civilian population. He recalls that the “*Ostjuden*” had already been victims in the Reich before the war: “[a]fter 1933, the “*Ostjuden*” in Germany, whose numbers were proportionally quite low, were the main victims of street violence, as they were extremely easy to identify. The Polish campaign and the direct confrontation with the mass of “*Ostjuden*” radicalized anti-Semitic denigration in Germany” (Musiał 2011, 183). The “*Ostjuden*” was a widespread anti-Semitic *topos* during the Third Reich.

Clearly, the religious Jews were the very first victims of the Nazi attacks. For example, in Ivano-Frankivsk “as soon as the Soviets disappeared, the Ukrainians began to harass men whose dress marked them as Jews by pulling their beards and beating them” (Tannenzapf and Renate 2009). Upon their arrival in Stryi, German soldiers arrested Jews on the street and cut their beards off. Jenny Backenroth recalls, “the first thing the Germans did when they arrived [in Boryslav], was to cut the beards of the men.”²³ Hidden in his attic when the Germans arrived at Chiortkiv, Carl Berkowitz recalls seeing two soldiers with a knife vigorously cutting the beard of a Jew, who was screaming in pain: “[a] scream like I’ve never heard before.” Then the Germans rubbed salt on his cheeks.²⁴ In Pidvolochysk, the main Jewish religious dignitaries – the rabbi, the kosher butcher, and their families – suffered terrible humiliations before their bestial murder:

On that day they took Rabbi Babad and his two sons Asher and Haim from their home, along with the kosher butcher Shalom Schwartz and his two sons. They cut off their beards and forced them to dance naked in front of a Ukrainian mob and criminals. One of mob, Grashko Schore hung Jewish refugees on hooks in the town square and looted their possessions along with his partners in crime (Gilson 1988).

The *Propagandakompanien* teams engaged on the Eastern front provided images of the Eastern Jews for the Nazi caricaturists with the aim to create a collective representation for the German audience. The *Deutsche Wochenschau* Nr.566 featured the faces of bearded or grimacing Jews to imply the contemptible culprits and accomplices of the NKVD in Lvov.²⁵ A grotesque scene occurred in Sasiv, a few days

23 Interview of Jenny Backenroth (née Rosen), on April 25, 1996, in Lakewood, VHA #14681.

24 Interview of Carl Berkowitz, on March 13, 1996, in West Palm Beach, VHA #13144.

25 *Deutsche Wochenschau* Nr.566, broadcast on July 9, 1941, USHMM RG-60.0267.

after the arrival of German troops. The soldiers arrested bearded Jews dressed in religious clothing, and rounded them up in the city center. They ordered them to put on their *tallitot* –prayer shawls – and then handed them guns. The German soldiers lined up along the opposite wall with their hands up. A scene of Jews shooting Germans was staged and consequently photographed. According to George Eisenberg, a Sasiv resident, the picture appeared in the newspapers the next day, calling on the Germans for revenge.²⁶ The Jews could be clearly identifiable in the paper. At the end of June 1941, in the market square of Sokal, while the leader of the Ukrainian militia, Charneski, was selecting the Jews to be shot by the *Sonderkommando 4a*, “the Germans activated their cameras. They chose religious Jews with beards and *peot* and made them kneel, sit, pose in any position.”²⁷ The beard made the Jews a target. On a Saturday – obviously the first Saturday of the occupation of Khorostkiv – all Jews with beards had to report to the town hall. From there, they were taken to the exit of Khorostkiv and forced to cover themselves with patty and other filth. The choice of Saturday, Shabbat, was not by accident. The targets of the “Germans and Ukrainians” (Zineman 1968, 367–369) were obviously pious Jews with beards. The Germans were certainly concerned that the Jews had to look a specific way for this staging. Rabbis were the driving force of the community: connoisseurs of Jewish law, consulted regularly to dispense justice or as a conciliator, and respected by the local Jewish population. As prominent figures, rabbis were particularly targeted by the Germans invaders, as seen by the following examples. In Skalat, during the July 6 pogrom, Rabbi Benjamin Wolowycz was tied behind a horse and dragged through the streets of the city, while the crowd consisting of Germans, Ukrainian militiamen, and peasants, excited the horse with a whip (Weissbrod 1948, 8). Markus Bliakh, a 53 year old rabbi from Hrymailiv, was one of the first targets of the Germans. In his statement, he gives an account of his torture:

Two German officers came to look for me in my apartment and took me to clean their vehicles. They then made me undress, then they gave me a bucket and forced me to carry water from one well to another. This job made no sense. Prichlivski looked after me and the other Jews, including Samuel Chnayder who worked with me. He kept hitting us with his gun. After 12 p.m., Velichuk came to relieve him, he beat us with his butts, other Ukrainians, residents of Hrymailiv, also took part (Statement of Markus Yakubovich Bliakh 1944).²⁸

In Sasiv, those participating in the pogroms tore off the rabbi’s beard, forced him to swallow mud and then loaded his back with stones. In the streets of Zolochiv, rabbis and devout Jews were beaten to death during the pogrom on July 3, 1941. Jews were

26 Interview of George Eisenberg, on October 16, 1996, in Fresh Meadows, VHA #20581.

27 Statement of Moses Brüh, on April 28, 1945, in Bucharest, YVA M.7 #1563.

28 Statement of Markus Bliakh, on December 27, 1944, in Hrymailiv, GARF 7021-75-94, p. 15.

forced to parade through the streets of the city with their sacred garments worn for praying, the *tallitot* and *tefillin*.²⁹

These cases illustrate that observant Jews were easily identifiable targets for German invaders without prior knowledge of the local population, and that they were systematically persecuted and/or brutally murdered in public. The scenes of humiliation, ranging from pulling of one's beard to unbearable torture underline an act of dehumanization and of desecration of the supporters of the Jewish religion. It was not only a question of attacking the "*Ostjuden*" resembling the caricatures of the *Stürmer*,³⁰ but also the initial acts towards the destruction of the Jewish population, by attacking, degrading and massacring their most respected representatives.

Stanisław Różycki interpreted the roundups in the streets of Lviv more as an order rather than a spontaneous impulse. He writes "[w]hat do these roundups, these shootings, these incarcerations mean? It is said to be the prelude to contributions. This went hand in hand with the situation on the Eastern Front: there was an instruction from above to mistreat the '*Ostjuden*' in particular."³¹ Różycki's theory was based on his experience, and he linked attacks against Jews to the payment of contributions. Insofar as he wrote this text at the latest in autumn/winter of 1941 in Warsaw, the massive dimension of the extermination of the Jews must have escaped him because he equated Nazi violence with blackmail to extort goods and money from the Jewish population. While that was a reality too, the attacks on Jews with religious appearance bore a message. In the constant concern to make publicity for the German troops supposedly liberating the people from the so-called Judeo-Bolshevik yoke, it was important to simultaneously display the assaults on the Jews. The *Propagandakompanien*'s photographs with the visibly identifiable Jews of the Lviv pogrom conveyed that message. It was also essential to show the multitude of people participating in this anti-Semitic violence, in accordance with the Nazi narrative justifying the annihilation war waged in the East.

3 A Religious Perception or Political Strategy?

The German soldiers behaved like conquerors in Eastern Galicia, seemingly leaving the local population complete freedom to carry out actions of "self-purification", to use Reinhard Heydrich's³² terms. In his letter to the *Einsatzgruppen* leaders, he urges the organization of pogroms against Jews and Communists, which are to be

²⁹ Interview of Mark Goldenberg, on February 27, 1996, in N. Miami Beach, VHA #12624.

³⁰ Nazi newspaper.

³¹ Diary of Stanisław Różycki, on July 25, 1941, in Lviv, YVA M.10 AR 1/459.

³² Letter of Reinhard Heydrich on June 29, 1941, in Hoppe and Glass 2011, 137–138.

carried out without leaving any traces behind in order to make believe that the pogroms derived from a uniquely local initiative. Hence, pogroms broke out with the support of Stepan Bandera's OUN-B (Rossolinski-Liebe 2014), which had branches in many Galician localities. Priests appear to have played a major role in mobilizing civilians to attack their Jewish neighbors (Gross 2001, 69).

A striking example of a priest's influence on the events took place in Ulashkivtsi. Ulashkivtsi was a village (*wies*) with 2037 inhabitants in 1929.³³ Located on the banks of the Seret River, it belonged to the Chortkiv county administration, but was barely 13 km north of Tovste. The annual Ulashkivtsi fair on July 7, "the festivity of Saint John", was renowned throughout Galicia (Glick 1965, 99–120). Known as *Свято Купала* in Ukrainian and *Иван Купала* in Russian, the feast of Saint John was celebrated all over Eastern Europe on July 7, following the Julian calendar still in force in the Eastern Christian Church. Both, a religious homage to Saint John Baptist, and a pagan celebration of the summer solstice, it was a very popular festival with the rural population. Attracting merchants from all over the region, the fair was so immense that there was even a Jewish saying: "As noisy as the Lashkewitz fair!" (Lachman 1978, 23), as in Yiddish it was called the "Lashkewitz Yerit."³⁴ The Ulashkivtsi fair was therefore, both a religious and a socio-economic event embedded in the Galician tradition, therefore despite the German invasion, the fair was held as usual on July 7, 1941.

On the day of the 1941 fair, peasants from the surroundings flocked to Ulashkivtsi, where a service was celebrated in the Greek Catholic church, attended mainly by Ukrainians. The orthodox priest, publicly supported by the local Ukrainian schoolteacher, Kornil Shebruk, urged the crowd of worshippers to kill the Jews. An attack took place the following night. Those participating in the pogrom lay in waiting around the houses, in the streets, in the vegetable gardens, and slaughtered the Jews on the spot. Shebruk informed the peasants about the Jews' whereabouts, "because he knew them [all],"³⁵ being the local teacher. He guided the gangs of peasants from the surrounding villages of Mylivtsi, Zabolotivka, and Sosulivka, who were led by a certain Petr Zakrevskii. Neither the children, nor the elderly were spared; attacks were directed against the monastery, which the Soviets had transformed into a hospice, where many elderly Jews lived. Three children, Zumerman, Kouba, Roza and Noucha, aged 11–15, were massacred. Their parents, Mendel and Klara, narrowly escaped the bloodbath – Klara hiding in a store. The perpetrator Zakrevskii testifies:

³³ *Księga Adresowa Polski dla Handlu, Przemysłu, Rzemiosł i Rolnictwa*, p. 1713.

³⁴ Hannah Simon, Lashkewitz Yerit, <https://kehila.links.jewishgen.org/Suchostav/Ulashkovtse/hannasmother.html> consultation on October 15, 2021.

³⁵ Statement of Petr Zakrevskii, on June 28, 1944, in Ulashkivtsi, GARF 7021-75-107, p. 112.

There were 5 Jewish families completely massacred: Golshtein Wolf, (...) and his Jewish family originally from Kolomyia whose last name I do not know. All the Jews killed were buried in a mass grave in the Ulashkivtsi *folwerk*.³⁶ It was a large estate once owned by a Pole, employing around 30 peasants, Ukrainians, and Poles. Fifteen Jews were found drowned in the Seret River. As many as 74 or 75 Jews were murdered at Ulashkivtsi.³⁷

Those who survived were driven out of the village by threatening letters, and fled to Tovste for the most part. The presence of peasants from the surrounding area certainly contributed to fulfilling the priest's incitement, which found a relay among the other priests as well.

Ulashkivtsi was not an isolated event. A Jewish survivor from Bolekhiv, Ellen Pressler also blames the clergy: "[e]xcited by the priests, the peasants murdered Jewish families who had lived nearby for years."³⁸ In the remote town of Yablunytsya, the priest gave a sermon to the Hutsuls after the Soviets had left, urging them to murder all the local Jews. A Jewish survivor reports, "[t]hus, they wanted to accomplish a sacred work – the priest had assured them of this – and would be rewarded for it (...)" (Husen 1958). In this same village, relatives of the priest recognized the priest and members of the choir in the pogroms.³⁹ Jan Gross mentioned the priest's fundamental role in appeasing or unleashing the population, which emphasizes the religious worldview of the peasant populations (Gross 2001).

In their dismay and confusion, Jews turned to the Catholic clergy hoping to find assistance, and ask the religious leaders to use their influence on the faithful in order to end to the violence. Leonard Mann's mother and grandmother begged a Tovste priest to convert them to escape the massacres but were refused.⁴⁰ On July 2, 1941, the chief rabbi of Lviv, Dr. Lewin, braved street violence to see Metropolitan Shepetyskyi to intercede with the Ukrainians on behalf of the Jews. On his way back, he was stopped by Ukrainians, and a German officer shot him.⁴¹ The Metropolitan of Lviv's character eloquently illustrates the ruthless position taken by the Orthodox clergy, whose function was clearly political. The clergy's influence on their followers was evident, and the persecuted Jews were not spared.

There are a wide range of studies and substantial literature about the rough character and influential position of the Metropolitan of Lviv (Magocsi 1989). Here, it is relevant to mention how the Jews perceived him. Another Jewish survivor from

³⁶ estate.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Statement of Ellen Pressler [date and place non indicated], AŽIH 301/2146.

³⁹ Interview of Andri P., on October 22, 2018, in Yablunytsya, YIU/2505U; Interview of Evgenia H., on October 22, 2018, in Yablunytsya, YIU/2506U.

⁴⁰ Interview of Leonard Mann, on January 31, 1997, in Woodmere, VHA #25447.

⁴¹ *The extermination of the Jews in Lvo*, on May 6, 1945, BArch B16-2101, p. 235.

Bolekhiv, Matylda Gelerntner's testimony is particularly interesting regarding the priests' participation in the events.⁴² At the beginning of her story, which was collected at the end of the 1940s, she underlines the connection between the clergy and political power: she reports that Metropolitan Shepetyskyi had announced the creation of a free Ukrainian state on the radio. Gelerntner identifies the priests as the instigators of popular violence in the villages. She writes "Excited by the priests, the peasants murdered Jewish families who had lived nearby for years. A 32-year-old woman and her 3-year-old daughter took refuge with the wife of a priest, but their hiding place was short-lived: they were shot as soon as they left the house."⁴³ During the Bolekhiv pogrom, a delegation consisting of Dr. Schindler and Dr. Blumenthal, went to find the priest Suchy, one of the most respected persons in the city, to ask him to intervene with the Ukrainian nationalists to end the pogrom, which Suchy accepted. He did this by explaining to the nationalists that a young state could not be built on such violence. The leader of the militia, Teffner, told the priest that he should concern himself with his church and not with politics. In protest, the priest removed the Ukrainian banner from the church. Gelerntner's story is remarkable because it highlights the importance of the priest, who can serve either as a protector; or, on the contrary, an agitator. As the bearer of a collective memory, Gelerntner endows the local priest an authoritarian power, or at least a moral ascendancy over the non-Jewish population. Appealing to the priest for help was even more justified because the departure of the Soviet authorities resulted in a chaos giving way to a new anti-Semitic order. In this atmosphere, the priest was perceived to have the ability to intervene and invoke a moral conduct that could have stopped the massacre of the Jews.

It was hardly surprising that the priest was seen as a responsible figure among the Jewish: after all, during the pogroms the assassins openly placed themselves under his aegis (citing the vengeance of Christ's death), and there had been religious tensions before the war, the memory of which came to feed this thesis. A native of Boryslav, Rita Harmelin recalls the ignorance and hatred of Jews: "[t]here were [Ukrainians and Poles] who knew almost nothing about Jews and whom the priests told to hate [Jews], so they hated them."⁴⁴ According to Sol Heitner, a Jewish resident of Chortkiv born in 1915, "anti-Semitism came from the church. The church taught them that the Jews had killed Jesus."⁴⁵ In addition, priests had manifestly joined the ranks of local collaborators, including the Ukrainian national committee

⁴² Statement of Matylda Gelerntner [date and place non indicated], AŽIH 301/2145.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Interview of Rita Harmelin, on April 26, 1992, in Australia, USHMM, RG-50.462*0039.

⁴⁵ Interview of Sol Heitner, on March 17, 1995, in Bronxville, VHA #1500.

(city council) in Skalat.⁴⁶ A Ukrainian priest greeted the arrival of the Germans in Staryi Sambir with a speech in their honor.⁴⁷

Even if it seems undeniable that priests had a certain political and moral weight, it is more complex to determine what their exact field of action was, as well as their precise role in the events. In other words, as tutelary and public figures, they may have been given full and complete responsibility for certain acts – encouraging or stopping a pogrom, for example. However, nothing indicates that they did not consult with the local authorities – such as the mayor newly appointed by the OUN for example – especially considering their apparent sympathy for the Ukrainian nationalist cause. The historian John-Paul Himka argues that at the end of the 19th century:

long was the only bridge between the worlds of the city-based national movement and the peasantry in the countryside. The priest was the only figure in the village who combined Ukrainian nationality, a university education, economic independence, and sanctioned authority. His support for the national movement was crucial for its penetration through the masses. (Himka 1984, 449)

According to Himka's research, the Greek Catholic priests of the villages may have held a socio-professional and economic discourse against the Jews, not necessarily along the well-known anti-Semitic libels of the Jewish deicide or the Jews as the slaughterers of Christian children. This interpretation attributes the priests an important local political role, which is in line with the demand of Ukrainian nationalist movements. Often voiced in the press, the demand was to make place for the nationalist Ukrainians, largely peasants, at the expense of the Jews. Even in the priests' discourses the Galician society's divisions are blamed for the conflicts and resentment. A priest, Gritsanova Palshovets, who had joined the Ukrainian committee created in Zolochiv after the arrival of the Germans, gathered the inhabitants in the square and delivered a sermon against the Communists, calling for their annihilation for the sake of the peasants' peace.⁴⁸ The speech was thus clearly political, and the priest acted as both: a spiritual leader, and a political activist.

Nevertheless, the Jews as well as the Ukrainians recognize the priest as the driving force behind such actions. Thus, the Jews interpret the massacres as religious revenge, as the fulfillment of the increasing anti-Semitic threats from before the war. The Jews attributed the priests a certain authority over the non-Jewish population, – which is why they asked the priests for help during the pogroms.

⁴⁶ Abraham Weissbrod, *Es starbt a shtetl; megiles Skalat* J. Kaplan ed., Central Historical commission of the Central Committee of Liberated Jews in the U.S. Zone of Germany, Munich, 1948 (trad. Joseph Kofler, Lusia Milch), pp. 6–7.

⁴⁷ Interview of Bohdan T., on April 26, 2018, in Staryi Sambir, YIU/2421U.

⁴⁸ Statement of German Levinter, on September 17, 1944, in Zolochiv, GARF 7021-67-80, p. 34–36.

As for the Ukrainians, the authoritarian and moral figure of the priest might bear the responsibility for the massacres committed. The priests' involvement placed the massacres in the Christian tradition of revenging Christ's murder. The vengeful motivations had a moral and divine dimension and according to this interpretation, the Ukrainians were only the avenging tools in a larger Christian narrative. A Jewish resident of Nyrkiv, Yeshaya Rosen saw Ukrainian farmers running through the streets, armed with axes and pitchforks, shouting: "Brothers, come and take revenge on the Jews who crucified Jesus, they are now about to kill us!" (Rosen 1965, 236).

The moral and divine law was invoked to support the political argument for killing the Jews. In the first decade of the 2000s, former neighbors of the Jews interviewed by the Yahad-In Unum team testified to the religious dimension of the war and the extermination of the Jews. In Yavoriv, two Ukrainian women, Evgenia B., born in 1929, and Maria G., born in 1921, recalled the inscription on the belt buckles of the Germans: "Gott mit uns," (*God is with us*).⁴⁹ Evgenia explains that the Ukrainian population of the town, under the vehemently atheistic Soviet administration since 1939, had been waiting impatiently for the Germans because of this reference to God. Many had a very simple religious explanation for the events, which they had supposedly heard from the Jews themselves: a Jewish neighbor of her mother said that she knew the fate that awaited them because they had to be punished for crucifying Christ.⁵⁰ Petro, a resident of Rohatin, describes the arrest of the Jews and their apparent calm: "[t]he Jews understood the situation well, that God had decided thus and that they had to accept it. They had crucified Christ and he said 'My blood will be on you and on your children' and they believed him."⁵¹ A resident of Vishnevets testified: "[t]he richest Jews knew [what was going to happen] because their rabbi had told them that they would have to suffer this misfortune, since it was written in the Bible," the murders were perceived as a punishment: "[i]t came from God."⁵² Oleksandr K., from the same town, relayed the same widespread view: "[t]he rabbi! He said that 'it was the destiny of the Savior.' They tortured the Savior ... And so he told them not to resist. It was exactly like that. 'We must not resist, we must go because we deserve it.'"⁵³ Motivating the massacre of Jews for divine reasons, whether in July 1941 or in the 2000s, frees the perpetrators and their accomplices from responsibility.

⁴⁹ Interview of Evgenia B., on January 9, 2009, in Yavoriv, YIU/738U; Interview of Maria G., on January 9, 2009, in Yavoriv, YIU/741U.

⁵⁰ Interview of Lev G., on September 15, 2009, in Rudky, YIU/762U.

⁵¹ Interview of Petro, on June 14, 2016, in Rohatyn, YIU/2102U.

⁵² Interview of Lidya V., on May 19, 2009, in Vishnevets YIU/842U.

⁵³ Interview of Oleksandr K., on May 19, 2009, in Vishnevets, YIU/840U.

4 Conclusions

In Eastern Galicia at the start of the German invasion, the German soldiers and *Einsatzgruppe C* members' first acts of violence had a visible, overtly religious dimension through the burning of synagogues, the desecration of religious objects, as well as the public and ostensible attack on the Jews of pious appearance in the continuity of the *Kristallnacht* and the Polish campaign of September 1939. The symbolic humiliation was mixed with strategic communication: observant men were easily identifiable as Jews and merged with the German representation of the *Ostjud* regularly caricatured in the Nazi press. Finally, the local population, in particular the Orthodox priests, also used the lever of religious revenge to mobilize for pogroms.

The Church and most priests' hostility to the Jewish religion is undeniable. The massacres seemed to have a moral imperative, yet for political ends. The religious dimension exempted criminals from their responsibility by the use of degrading caricatures of the Jewish victims, and by the authoritative figure of the priest. Thus, the troops of the Reich in the East had been exploiting the moral dimension of the persecution of the Jews from the beginning of the war. It became a categorical imperative and a communication tool to convey a radical message: Jews were to be excluded from the community.

Hitler's almost mystical anti-Semitism added to these elements might have led to the "divine mission" to exterminate Jews. Friedländer quoted from *Mein Kampf*: "Today I believe that I act according to the will of the Almighty Creator: in defending myself against the Jew, I fight to defend the work of the Lord" (Friedländer 1998). It would be interesting to see how this exterminating Hitlerian hubris influenced the perception of his subordinates, and how this dimension was articulated with leading Nazi Party members, such as Heinrich Himmler for instance, as the driving force behind the acceleration of the extermination of the Jews in occupied-Soviet territories.

This religious dimension was less explicit in the aftermath of the Holocaust in the occupied Soviet territories, which can be explained by the religion as a taboo in the Soviet politics.

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