Contrasting shadows: the Jewish experience in Lithuania and Poland

I recently returned from a Holocaust and genocide study trip to Poland, where one of the most profound lessons was the complexity of historical truth. In confronting the horrors of the past, we often seek clarity or simple moral narratives, but the reality is far more nuanced.

A commonly held belief among many South African Jews is that the Jewish experience during the Holocaust was equally horrific across Eastern Europe, particularly in relation to their non-Jewish neighbours. In particular, I compare the Jewish experience in Lithuania to that of Poland, focusing on the role of non-Jewish neighbours.

I acknowledge that this is an ever-evolving field of study, with new evidence and testimony continuing to emerge. Our responsibility isn't to settle on simplified narratives, but to engage deeply with historical record, acknowledging its contradictions and honouring its complexity.

Clarifying terminology

In this article, "Nazi" refers to the ruling party and its ideology, while "German" refers to the state, authorities, or military forces of Germany under Nazi rule.

Comparative overview

The Jewish experience during the Holocaust in Lithuania and Poland had devastating similarities, such as the systematic persecution and the near destruction of centuries-old communities, but also significant differences, particularly in the roles played by non-Jewish neighbours. In Lithuania, the genocide was marked by rapid, locally assisted mass shootings, with widespread and direct participation by Lithuanian collaborators. In contrast, though there were instances of local collaboration and violence in Poland, most Jews were murdered in Nazi-established extermination sites, and Polish responses ranged from collaboration to extensive rescue efforts, often under threat of the harshest penalties in occupied Europe.

Lithuania: "The Holocaust of bullets"

In Lithuania, more than 95% – about 195 000 of 210 000 – of Lithuanian Jews were murdered, mostly in mass shootings with local participation, between June and December 1941, making it one of the most complete and rapid genocides in Europe.

A key factor in Lithuania was the extensive and direct participation of local Lithuanian collaborators, including paramilitary groups, police, and civilians, in mass killings. These groups often assisted Nazi Einsatzgruppen in executing Jews near their homes in mass graves, a phenomenon now known as the "Holocaust of bullets".

Mass shootings occurred in forests and pits near towns, for example, the Ponary massacre near Vilnius and the Ninth Fort massacre near Kaunas, with few Jews initially sent to ghettos or camps. Ghettos were established in major cities, but were rapidly liquidated, often within months.

Local collaboration in the murder of Jews was widespread and often direct, contributing to the near-total destruction of the Jewish community in a noticeably brief period. Many locals participated directly in mass killings, especially in the early months of German occupation. The

Nazis exploited and inflamed existing antisemitism, blaming Jews for the Soviet occupation, and encouraging local violence.

Violence against Jews erupted even before German forces arrived, with Lithuanians conducting riots and massacres such as the Kaunas massacre in June 1941.

Some Lithuanians saw collaboration as a means to settle personal scores or acquire property, while others hoped that co-operation with Germany might help restore Lithuanian independence. Many Lithuanian authorities and police didn't merely fail to resist Nazi extermination policies, but in numerous documented cases, actively implemented these policies with a zeal that, at times, even exceeded Nazi expectations. The Lithuanian Security Police and auxiliary units were also integral to the genocide.

While Lithuania's Holocaust experience was distinguished by swift local brutality, in contrast, Poland's tragedy unfolded within a broader and more systematised Nazi machine of extermination.

Poland: "Ghettos, camps, killing centres, and complexity"

In Poland, about 90% of the prewar Jewish population – more than 3.3 million people – were murdered, primarily in killing centres established by the Nazis such as Treblinka, Auschwitz, Belzec, Chelmno, Majdanek, and Sobibor.

The role of non-Jewish neighbours in Poland was more complex and varied by the diversity of Polish society, including regional differences and urban/rural divides. Though there were instances of collaboration, denunciation, and violence by some Poles, there were also many Poles who risked their lives to help Jews.

Helping Jews was punishable by death, not just for the helper, but for the entire family including children. The collective death penalty was formally codified and often enforced.

There was no collaborationist government in Poland, unlike countries like France, Norway, or Slovakia. The official policy of the Polish government in exile was to denounce Nazi atrocities against its Jewish citizens; carry out executions or beatings of known blackmailers – sometimes referred to by the Polish term "*szmalcownik*" (an individual who extorted Jews or those who hid them during Nazi occupation); provide aid to Jews fleeing persecution; as well as supplying a limited number of arms to Jewish forces such as Jewish combat organisation ZOB (Żydowska Organizacja Bojowa) and underground resistance ZZW (Żydowski Związek Wojskowy), which sought to fight the Nazis in the Warsaw Ghetto.

During the Ghetto Uprising, the Polish Home Army attempted to assist ghetto fighters by breaking into the ghetto and creating a breach in the wall. A secret organisation was also formed called "*Zegota*", officially known as the Council to Aid Jews, or *Rada Pomocy Żydom*, which was a Polish underground organisation established in December 1942 under the auspices of the Polish Government in exile.

Żegota and rescue efforts

Żegota was the only organisation in Nazi-occupied Europe created specifically to aid Jews, and operated as part of the broader Polish resistance. Its members, drawn from across political and religious lines, provided Jews with false identity documents; hiding places; financial assistance; food; and medical aid. The organisation was particularly active in rescuing children, notably through the efforts of Irena Sendler, who helped save about 2 500 Jewish children by placing them in convents, orphanages, or with Polish families. Żegota's work was conducted under constant

threat of execution, making its achievements a powerful example of moral courage during a time where terror was prevalent.

Polish underground and intelligence

Polish underground operatives such as Pielecki and Karski were tasked with entering concentration camps and ghettos to provide first-hand accounts of the crimes being committed against the Jews. Jan Karski, working for the London government in exile, was later able to provide his testimony personally to President Franklin D Roosevelt in the Oval Office.

Local violence did occur, but systematic murder was conducted by Nazi German authorities and forces. Polish society was deeply affected by the occupation, with about three million Polish Catholics perishing at the hands of the Nazis, and those caught helping Jews were severely punished as Nazi authorities imposed the harshest penalties in all of occupied Europe on Poles caught helping Jews. These included the death penalty; collective punishments; beatings; and deportation to concentration or killing centres. The Institute of National Remembrance (IBN) estimates that more than 1 000 Poles were executed during the war for helping Jews.

While some Poles informed on or exploited Jews, many risked their lives to rescue them and became recognised as "Righteous among the nations" for their rescue efforts. Poland has the highest number of officially recognised Righteous among the nations, with 7 280 Poles honoured by Yad Vashem for risking their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum states that tens of thousands of Poles helped Jews, although only a portion were recognised. Lithuania, by comparison, has a much smaller number of recognised Righteous among the nations, with 924 individuals officially honoured by Yad Vashem. The smaller number reflects both the smaller prewar Jewish population in Lithuania, and the quite different local circumstances and attitudes, including widespread local collaboration in the genocide.

Polish complicity: ongoing debate

The question of what percentage of Polish non-Jews were complicit in the murder of their Jewish neighbours during the Holocaust is the subject of ongoing historical debate and research. Studies emphasise that non-Jewish complicity took many forms and varied widely by region, making it difficult to provide a single, precise percentage of the Polish non-Jewish population that was complicit. Thus, there is no universally agreed-upon percentage, including blackmailers who extorted or betrayed Jews in hiding; locals who denounced Jews for ideological or personal reasons or to receive small rewards from the Nazis; and village authorities and Polish police officers who enforced German orders. Some Home Army units killed Jews while others helped them. Some ghetto fighters even ended up fighting in Home Army units during the Warsaw Uprising of 1944.

Complicity varied widely by region, making it difficult to provide a single, precise percentage of the Polish non-Jewish population that was complicit. It appears, subject to later research, that more than 99,7% of all Polish Jews were killed at the hands of the Germans and their Ukrainian, Lithuanian, and Latvian collaborators and not at the hands of the Poles. Very few – if any – Poles guarded any of the death or concentration camps, although the Polish police were used to cordon off ghettos. The largest known pogrom conducted by Poles during the war against their Jewish neighbours was at Jedwabne. The largest pogrom after the war was in Kielce in 1946, and resulted in 42 Jews being killed.

While few Jews were killed at the hands of the Poles, many more died because of denunciations by Poles. According to the IBN, about 3 000 to 5 000 Poles were prosecuted after the war for crimes against Jews, but this number underestimates the true number of collaborators as many were never identified or prosecuted and such collaborators probably numbered in the tens of

thousands. While these incidents are a tragic and shameful part of Polish history, it's important to recognise them within the broader context of the Holocaust and avoid letting them overshadow the full complexity of Polish-Jewish relations during this period. History is always nuanced and complicated.

Conclusion

While both Lithuania and Poland suffered near-total destruction of their Jewish populations during the Holocaust, Lithuania's genocide was marked by rapid, locally assisted mass shootings and widespread collaboration by non-Jewish Lithuanians, resulting in one of the swiftest and most complete annihilations of Jews in Europe. In contrast, Jewish destruction in Poland involved a more complex interplay of Nazi-imposed ghettos; deportations to killing centres; and a wider spectrum of local responses ranging from collaboration to rescue.

This attempt to provide a nuanced account of Jewish experience in Poland and Lithuania during the Holocaust shouldn't be misconstrued as an effort to sanitise or whitewash Polish history. Rather, it reflects an attempt to engage deeply with the complexities and realities, both shameful and heroic, of this tragic period.

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