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Round table discussion: after the war – beginning life anew in the aftermath of violence

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The debate was recorded before 7 October 2023.

Magdalena Waligórska: We started planning this round table discussion because of our overlapping interests in the postwar history of Jewish survivors in Poland, Ukraine, and Belarus. Looking at these three countries, we all have been researching societies ravaged by war, decimated by the genocide, and suffering traumas. We initially thought it would be interesting to bring together experts on the postwar period and compare how Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine coped with the traumas of the war. And this is when the new war in Ukraine broke out, and we realized that the questions we had been dealing with were no longer of purely historical nature. They suddenly became painfully topical, relevant, and urgent. The Second World War returned to the public imagination with full force, inspiring propaganda and fueling new war narratives.

As the East-Central European societies were possibly not yet quite ready to work through the trauma of the last war, suddenly, we found ourselves in the middle of a new one. This brought up some new questions: Can understanding the Second World War and its aftermath give us any insights into the current war and the challenges our region will face? What new questions appear, and which new taboos emerge? Can looking into the past help us understand what new beginning Europe will face after the end of this war?

All of you have researched the aftereffects of the Second World War and the long process in which societies in East-Central Europe have been reckoning with loss and trauma, looking for justice, living next to ruins, mass graves, and coming to terms with the aftermath of violence. Which lessons, from your perspective, can research on the aftermath of the Second World War give us about the future end of this current war in Ukraine and the challenges that East-Central Europe is likely to face?

Natalia Aleksiun: Let me share some initial thoughts. I do not believe in lessons learned and applied from one region to another and from one havoc of war and destruction to

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another, experienced in the same region. As a scholar of East European Jewish history and the Holocaust, I have sought to map out communal and individual choices made by the survivors. In the months that passed since the Russian invasion in February 2022, I have been thinking about connections between the two war aftermaths, one of which lies still in the future. These could be both practical and discursive echoes. Let me just mention three such issues.

For the survivors of the Holocaust in Eastern and East-Central Europe, the question of returning home was crucial and far from obvious. Most had neither the family, nor home or community to return to: borders shifted, homes were destroyed or had other non-Jewish inhabitants. When they did return, they faced violence and what has been referred to as 'unwelcoming.'[1] Ida Fink, a survivor from Zbaraż, described the coming together of a handful of survivors in a town somewhere in Eastern Europe. Titled 'The Tenth Man,' her short story portrays a community made up by broken individuals who had lost everyone and everything.[2] Moreover, Polish Jews pondered the question of returning home, whether from the Soviet Union where they survived 'on the margins,' as Eliyana Adler's recent book shows, or from Western Europe where they were liberated.[3] Reestablishing a network of Jewish self-help organizations, survivors attached particular importance to Jewish children that needed to be recovered and looked after. And yet, official and unofficial Jewish organizations were deeply divided about their vision of the future for the children. How, where, and in what language ought the precious Jewish children be raised? Last but not least, in the aftermath of the war, Polish Jews began a communal project, known as the Central Jewish Historical Commission, of recording the history of the Holocaust, collecting diaries written during the war, and encouraging survivors to share their experiences in the form of individual testimonies. Survivor scholars envisioned these testimonies as crucial historical records for researchers but also as an important body of evidence for future trials.[4] Collecting these testimonies to be shared with Polish courts allowed survivors to exercise a sense of agency in seeking justice, including trials of individuals accused of collaborating with the German Nazi occupiers.

Today, these three aspects of the postwar: decisions about returning home, ensuring a particular vision of a future for children that were taken out of Ukraine either voluntarily or by force, and the matter of collecting historical documentation, have already been at the center of discussions and grass root activism among Ukrainian refugees abroad and at home. One of the collecting initiatives has been put together by the Center for Urban History in Lviv.[5]

Magdalena Waligórska: One of the theme fields that you mentioned was this search for justice, and legal processes of the trials, which are already taking place in the case of the war in Ukraine.

Franziska Exeler: The consequences of Russia's war against Ukraine are undoubtedly going to be tremendous, both in the short and in the long run. If we are approaching the question of war legacies from a historical perspective, we can analyze it on different levels: political, economic, legal, social, cultural, and personal. We can discuss it by focusing on Ukraine and its population, but we can also zoom out and ask about transnational and global consequences.

I would like to begin with one thought about the personal consequences of war and how that question resonates with those of us who are studying the Second World War. In terms of sheer numbers, the extent of violence that the German occupation and the Second World War brought over Eastern Europe was obviously much greater than the violence that Russia's war against Ukraine has thus far produced and continues to produce every day. Still, it goes without saying that every loss of human life is an utter tragedy, a life-shattering catastrophe for those who lose loved ones. What I have learned from my research about the Second World War and its aftermath is that for those who either lost loved ones, who themselves became victims of violence (whether through torture, rape, abuse, or else mistreatment), or who witnessed how humans committed violence against others, the war never became history.

In both public and academic discussions, we often use the expressions 'confronting the past' or 'coming to terms with the past.' Especially the latter suggests that this is a process that provides some form of closure. Yet for those who suffered violence themselves or who lost a loved one to the war, the trauma, grief, and loss was not something that could possibly be 'overcome.' Rather, it remained ever-present. Some found coping mechanisms that helped them live with the grief in whatever small way possible or tried to focus their attention on activities that filled their lives with meaning again.[6] The family as well as other social relations were often of paramount importance here, as were professional or community activities undertaken by the survivors. Still, the wounds left by the war, the devastating losses – of their families, of their homes, of their communities – that victims of the Second World War (Jewish and non-Jewish) experienced, could never 'heal,' to use another word that is commonly used in public debates on the aftermath of the war. The past is always present, and the grief and the trauma are also present, although they show themselves in different ways. I think this can be universalized; it will also apply to Russia's war against Ukraine. Remembering thus also does not fulfill the purpose of forgiving – a task that seems preposterous to ask of survivors. Rather, it often serves to keep the memory of those who were lost alive, to make visible the crimes of the perpetrators – and, ideally, to seek legal or moral accountability.[7]

On the question of criminal prosecutions and the role of justice – these are very important, yet also very complicated questions, with an extensive historiography on the history of (international) criminal law to draw on. What is the purpose of criminal trials? Whom are they supposed to serve? What kind of justice is being delivered at a trial?[8] As historians examining war crimes trials that took place in the aftermath of the Second World War, there are two different analytical dimensions that we need to take into account. For one, from a technical or procedural perspective, there is the question of whether a trial fulfilled the criteria of a fair trial. In criminal law, the purpose of a trial is to establish beyond doubt the criminal responsibility of the individual on trial. To do so, the trial needs to meet certain criteria, that is, it needs to fulfill fundamental standards of rule-of-law-based legal systems such as an independent judiciary, independent defense lawyers, and the assumption of 'innocent until proven guilty.' In liberal legal systems, these criteria form the precondition for a trial to be deemed as impartial as possible.

The second analytical dimension to keep in mind is the question of the subjective perception of justice, which is not the same as the question of whether a trial meets the technical and legal requirements of a fair trial. A trial can lack fundamental standards of the rule of law, yet it can still be perceived as being justified, or even just. Such was the case with Soviet (public and secret) postwar trials of German and other Axis soldiers, for example. While these trials did not fulfill the criteria of a fair trial, many Soviet citizens, having survived the utter horrors of German occupation, deemed them justified. This also applied to many people (although not all) in the audience who attended the public Soviet war crimes trials, yet who understood or sensed their procedural shortcomings. In other words, in public perception, the atrocities that the Germans had committed could legitimize a significant lack of the rule of law on part of the Soviet military tribunals that tried German and other Axis soldiers.

Whether these trials helped survivors of the war in their attempt to live with their trauma, loss, and grief, though, is yet again another question. Anthropologists, lawyers, and political scientists have studied this question with respect to the 1990s wars in former Yugoslavia. If we look at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) at The Hague that was established to prosecute the war crimes that had been committed during the Yugoslav Wars, we can see that the ICTY served different political purposes. For the survivors of violence who testified at the trials, though, they had much less of a positive effect than scholars or lawyers had hoped. To encourage any potential at reconciliation, local community initiatives were found to be much more effective than international criminal trials.[9]

The Yugoslav Wars differed from Russia's war against Ukraine. Still, we can cautiously apply the insights that scholarship on the history of war crimes trials has gained from these wars to the current situation, too. Trials of individual Russian soldiers who are being investigated and prosecuted in Ukraine for atrocities committed during the first phase of the invasion (for example in Bucha) are of great symbolic importance, clearly communicating to a wider domestic and international public that, to the extent that this is possible, Russian war crimes will not go unpunished. What we cannot yet predict, though, is whether these trials will help the individual survivors of violence, or the relatives of those who were tortured and killed. That is a question that can only be answered by them, on an individual case-by-case basis.

Magdalena Waligórska: I find it very true that war never becomes history for those who lived through it. It also becomes very evident in Yechiel Weizman's recent book, *Unsettled Heritage,* which tackles these long-term aftereffects of wartime destruction and documents the way people come to terms with living next door to ruins.

Yechiel Weizman: Although it is still early to discuss the long-term ramifications of the war in Ukraine now, I do believe that the research on the aftermath of the Second World War allows us to draw some conclusions that might hold true in the case of the current war. A brutal and devastating war, which involves mass civilian deaths, severe material destruction, and the displacement of millions of people, as we are witnessing it now in Ukraine, changes the very definition of what a society is, and it generates aftershocks

that continue to reverberate decades after the conflict's end. So in this sense, the end of the war in Ukraine, which we all hope will happen soon, will merely be a departure point for a collective reckoning with trauma.

A poem by Wisława Szymborska, who lived through the Second World War in Kraków, pictures well that crucial moment of the 'return to life.'

> After every war
> someone has to clean up.
> Things will not
> straighten themselves up after all.
>
> Someone has to push the rubble
> to the side of the road
> so the corpse-filled wagons
> can pass.[10]

Indeed, the rubble will be pushed to the side of the road, and the ruins will be cleaned up. But, as the Polish case has taught us, the devastating effects of war linger long after the material reconstruction has been completed. Where property relations undergo a revolution, destruction of residential quarters and basic infrastructure impacts millions of people, and war-related displacements target entire populations, as it happened in East-Central Europe in the aftermath of 1945, 'coming back to life' is fraught with many challenges.

There is always a tension in post-conflict societies between the desire to start a new life and to overcome the traumas of the past, and the inability to do so due to the unsettling nature of the violent experiences. This tension, I believe, both on a personal and a national level, often leads to the repression of uncomfortable memories and to the development of emotions such as shame and guilt that, instead of facilitating the working through of the trauma, often encourage silence and forced forgetfulness.

Magdalena Waligórska: The Second World War wrought a similar havoc in Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine, with the Holocaust, mass atrocities against the civilians, forced migrations, border shifts. The books you all authored address the aftereffects of the war, be it looking at the returns of survivors to their places of origin, the ways societies sought justice in the postwar period, or strategies they used to reinhabit empty spaces and appropriate abandoned heritage (such as, for example, synagogues and Jewish cemeteries). Where do you see commonalities in the ways Ukraine, Belarus, and Poland were recovering from/reckoning with the war, and where are the differences that characterize the three countries?

Franziska Exeler: It is important to begin by saying that when we speak of postwar Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine, we speak of these countries within their post-1945 borders. These borders reflected the westward shift of the Soviet Union (and thus of Poland) as a result of Moscow's territorial annexations in 1939–40, which were confirmed at the 1945 Yalta Conference. As a result of these annexations, structural differences existed within each of these countries. In the case of Belarus, its eastern part had been Soviet for roughly two decades before the Second World War, while its western part was only annexed from Poland in 1939. In 1941, the German army occupied

both parts; in 1944, the Red Army regained control over Belarus. In other words, these different pre-1941 histories of western and eastern Belarus must be considered when we want to analyze how, for example, the experience of prior Soviet rule affected the choices that individuals made under Nazi rule. Also, when we speak about war memory, we have to ask: when did the war begin for people in western Belarus? In the summer of 1941, with the German invasion of Belarus? Or in the fall of 1939, when, following the Hitler-Stalin Pact, the Soviet Union occupied and subsequently annexed eastern Poland?

Another way to approach the question of differences and similarities between these three countries' postwar trajectories would be to examine the prosecutions of those whom the returning authorities deemed to have collaborated with the Germans during the war. In the case of the Soviet Union, a variety of different actors (state security officers, military prosecutors, judges, and party-state leaders) were involved in the punitive process. However, the general course was always set by the leading Bolsheviks in Moscow, and as such was to be applied uniformly across the western regions of the Soviet Union – which is why the Soviet politics of retribution in Ukraine and Belarus (as in the other Soviet republics that were under German occupation) resembled each other greatly. At the same time, Soviet punitive practices were not static but rather varied over time. As the war years gave way to the postwar, they alternated between more lenient and stricter, less active and more expansive phases in response to shifting domestic and international circumstances and events.[11]

With respect to the communal level, one regional difference within Belarus was that in the immediate postwar years, western Belarus was politically more volatile, more contested than eastern Belarus, over which the Soviet state security organs were quickly able to reassert control. That postwar volatility of western Belarus was linked to the presence of anti-Soviet, nationalist partisans who were fighting against the return of Soviet power. It also affected Holocaust survivors, though. For them, the countryside around Navahrudak and Vileika, where the Polish Armia Krajowa was still active in the second half of 1944 and in early 1945, and the southwestern border region with Ukraine, where Ukrainian nationalists (members of the OUN-UPA) were active in the first postwar years, were relatively dangerous places. This was so not just because of the general political volatility and the struggle between the anti-Soviet partisans and the Soviet state security organs, but also because some members of the Polish Armia Krajowa and the Ukrainian nationalists attacked Holocaust survivors – whether out of anti-Semitism or because those who survived the Holocaust usually did so fighting with the Soviet partisans. However, if we broaden the analytical lens and compare western Belarus to western Ukraine, we can see that western Belarus, although a more dangerous place for Holocaust survivors than eastern Belarus, was a less dangerous place for Holocaust survivors than western Ukraine, where Ukrainian nationalist resistance against the Soviets was much stronger and continued into the late 1940s.

The last point that I would like to raise about similarities and differences between postwar Poland, Ukraine, and Belarus relates to the different geographies of wartime violence. Not only did the Germans murder almost the entire Jewish population of Belarus, an estimated 500,000–671,000 people. As part of so-called anti-partisan operations, they also razed to the ground approximately 9,200 villages, more than anywhere else in Nazi-occupied Europe, and killed up to 345,000 civilians – some of them Jews, but the overwhelming majority were non-Jewish rural residents. By the summer of 1944, many cities

lay in ruins and entire rural districts had been burned down. The postwar return to these places will have been a different experience than, say, the experience of someone in Poland who moved to Lower Silesia after 1945, which until 1945 belonged to Germany – and which had its own, but very different geographies of violence.

Natalia Aleksiun: The experience of postwar Poland, Ukraine, and Belarus differed within their new borders and differed for members of respective communities. My most recent research has focused on eastern Galicia or what is today western Ukraine, which became part of the Second Polish Republic, as 'Małopolska Wschodnia' in the aftermath of the First World War. After September 1939, this region was occupied by the Soviet Union and came under German occupation in the summer of 1941. These occupations were experienced differently along ethnic lines. From the point of view of the handful of Jewish survivors, the territory was liberated by the Soviets in the spring and summer of 1944, although the perspective of ethnic Poles and Ukrainians on the same event was more ambivalent. The point of departure in the region and the experience of the postwar differed dramatically for Poles, Ukrainians, and Jews. On the whole, they also made different collective choices and had different possibilities of returning home and/or rebuilding their lives. These were also different between the part of contemporary Ukraine that was Soviet before 1939.

Identities of survivors and their cultural know-how do not fit contemporary political borders. Survivors in western Ukraine and western Belarus would likely have seen themselves as Polish Jews and left testimonies in which they related to their experiences as Polish citizens before the war, their familiarity with the Polish language and culture – cultural capital which played a role in their survival. They also shared their decision of leaving for Poland in its new borders with ethnic Poles. There is one more aspect of the regional differences that I would like to mention: different scale and patterns of postwar anti-Jewish violence, which affected the changes of rebuilding Jewish life in Eastern and East-Central Europe: the new, western Polish territories seem to have been safer than central and eastern Poland (in its post-1945 borders).

Magdalena Waligórska: Yechiel, you looked at the postwar fate of Jewish heritage across Poland. Would you also agree that there are Polish histories of coming to terms with the war and not just a single Polish scenario of coming to terms with the heritage of the war?

Yechiel Weizman: I would agree, yes, especially when you compare Poland in its original prewar borders with the newly gained western parts, Lower Silesia and other regions. We can see that for Jews returning to their hometowns in post-1945 central and eastern Poland, the attempt to preserve and protect their heritage sites was perceived as a moral and sacred duty. But when we examine western Poland (i.e. the former German lands), it appears that the Jews who were being resettled there did not see the preservation and protection of German-Jewish heritage sites as an imperative. For the new Polish-Jewish settlers, the material Jewish traces of the German Jewish community had a different status than the 'vernacular' Polish-Jewish landscape. They usually tried to preserve these spaces to the extent that they could use them for practical-religious purposes, but not as an end to itself.

Natalia Aleksiun: I would like to make a brief comment here, connected with the collective sense of loss and despair many survivors in East-Central Europe experienced in the aftermath of the war: that they were uprooted from their towns, streets, and homes and unable to share in whatever sense of victory non-Jews may have experienced. Most of them chose to leave East-Central Europe, leaving behind their personal memory sites as well as their communal heritage sites. Do you think their relative indifference or sense of estrangement from the German Jewish material culture might have been connected with their being already in flux? After the summer of 1946, many of these Polish Jews in the so called 'Recovered Territories' were either planning or considering emigrating from Poland. Therefore, their use of the sites was pragmatic but short term.

Yechiel Weizman: Yes, in many ways for the displaced and resettled Polish-Jewish communities in the so-called 'Recovered Territories' in western Poland, there was less of what I would call 'a sense of belonging' to the local landscape. They did not feel that they were 'coming back' to their hometowns – which, indeed, they did not. The traces of Jewish heritage they 'inherited' from German Jews were alien to them. What is more – one can observe this sentiment in the accounts of resettled Polish Jewish survivors – these remnants bore the mark of German culture, the same one that had tried to annihilate them. The encounter between the new Polish-Jewish settlers and the German Jews, who still remained in the formerly German territories for a short while after the war, was, likewise, not an easy one. There were a lot of mutual animosities. Despite the attempts to bridge this cultural gap, German Jews soon realized that they could not stay in what used to be their hometowns. Persecuted by the Nazis themselves, they were often being mistreated as Germans. After a while, they gradually realized that the new Jewish life that was starting to develop in the 'Recovered Territories' was alien to them and could not be reconciled with their own attempts to rebuild their communal lives.

Magdalena Waligórska: Your research shows with full clarity the extent of the challenges that the post-Second World War societies had to face in this part of Europe. But when does the postwar era of healing, seeking justice, reckoning with one's complicity actually end? Do you believe that this process of 'working through' the Second World War has been completed in Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine? Or has this process only been interrupted now by the new war?

Natalia Aleksiun: This is such a complicated question. In terms of the ongoing war in Ukraine, we are far from the luxury of reflecting on the processes of healing and reckoning. Also, as historians, we are hardly qualified to imagine the future processes. What we do have are methodological tools and sources, as well as historiographies that have grappled with the postwar of the Second World War. For that aftermath, the working through is both done and still open, still very raw. The answer very much depends on where we look, whom we ask, and what sources we examine. On the one hand, in East-Central Europe a great deal of work has been done, especially in the field of education, through the work of local memory activists and historians, through encounters between the now third generation of survivors and perpetrators, as well as those who

have been – for better and for worse – described as bystanders.[12] The work of various NGOs has been crucial in creating opportunities for youth from Poland and Israel to meet. But the so-called difficult questions remain difficult. Old taboos have not been turned into subjects of conversation that would not be deeply divisive and politicized. The subjects of wartime collaboration and wartime and postwar violence against Jews or transfer of Jewish property into the hands of their non-Jewish neighbors still trigger responses – in academia and beyond – that suggest that the postwar reckoning is hardly an issue of the past. This is still leading to extremely anxious responses, particularly on the level of state officials and government-sponsored institutions such as the Pilecki Institute or the Institute of National Remembrance but also in private conversations.[13] It seems that in Poland, the history and memory of the Holocaust and its aftermath still have the power to mobilize a charged public discourse and at the same time to silence that discourse.

Franziska Exeler: Confronting a wartime past, grappling with the aftermath of horrific violence and extreme moral circumstances, is usually a process that brings up very painful questions and issues – whether on the personal level or on a larger political, societal level. To this day, different – and not seldom diverging – memories of the Second World War continue to spark much debate across Central and Eastern Europe.[14] Having said that, if we study reconciliation processes over time, we can see how civil society initiatives in particular have had a tremendous impact on the willingness of individuals and societies to confront silences and taboos, and to acknowledge questions of guilt and complicity. In that process, the individual act of admitting guilt (for crimes personally committed or abetted, for remaining inactive, for looking away) and/or the acknowledgement of later generations of a collective moral responsibility has often played a significant role – if it was and is meant sincerely, and if it was and is being perceived as such by the survivors of violence.

I would like to add one more aspect to our discussion on how these processes of confronting the past have historically unfolded in East-Central Europe – and continue to unfold today. While each of us has stressed how important the local and domestic context is in each case, at the same time, confronting wartime legacies could also be an interconnected, transnational process (although the extent of interconnectedness varied according to time and place). I have in mind here what we can call 'Nazi war crimes trials,' in other words, the trials of individuals accused of having committed war crimes in the name of German power, which were conducted by both democratic and authoritarian countries in the decades following the Second World War. While the first wave of trials occurred right after the war, beginning in the late 1950s a second wave of trials took place, mainly in the Soviet Union, but also in East Germany, Poland, and other Warsaw Pact countries. Initiated by the Politburo in Moscow, the prosecution was spurred by a combination of different domestic and international factors, including Cold War dynamics. Domestically, that is, within the Soviet Union, the homecomings of Soviet citizens convicted for wartime collaboration yet released under the 1956 amnesty ignited local conflicts and led to new accusations from victims, which in turn led to the (re)opening of criminal cases. Heavily discredited by Nikita Khrushchev's 1956 Secret Speech, the KGB sought to build a positive public image as an unrelenting hunter of Nazi accomplices. Internationally, the 1961 trial of

Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem brought Nazi atrocities to a global audience. With the rise of West Germany as a major European power, East-West tensions over the continued employment of former Nazi functionaries in the West German state apparatus increased. Throughout the 1960s, the Soviet government repeatedly – and often correctly so – accused not just West Germany, but also the United Kingdom and the United States of harboring war criminals and granting them immunity. If we want to properly understand this second wave of trials, we have to ask about the interplay of local, domestic, and international factors that both brought these war crimes trials about and that have shaped their course.[15]

Magdalena Waligórska: We mentioned a couple of times how long these processes of recovering from war-time traumas are and that they can take decades. Where do you see areas in which East-Central European societies still struggle with the legacy of the Second World War, where we are not finished with it yet?

Yechiel Weizman: If we examine the Polish case, for instance, we realize the extent to which struggling with a difficult past is a never-ending process. In today's Poland, perhaps more than in any other country, we constantly see how the wartime past refuses to stay in the past, especially when it comes to the difficult question of Polish-Jewish relations during the Holocaust. And this despite the fact that, among all other post-socialist states, Poland has devoted the most serious efforts to shedding light on such thorny questions as local complicity in the murder and persecution of Jews. Since the early 2000s, following the groundbreaking studies by Jan Tomasz Gross and others, Polish society has undergone a collective soul-searching. The new insights on Polish complicity in anti-Jewish violence, brought to light in the first place by Polish historians, have led to a sincere self-reflection among large parts of the society. President Kwaśniewski, who issued a public apology in Jedwabne in 2001, was the first East European leader who apologized on behalf of the entire nation for anti-Jewish violence committed by local populations. Yet precisely these attempts to openly acknowledge the dark past generated a defensive nationalist backlash, which, in turn, torpedoed any further official gestures of this kind. Instead, after the PiS party's rise to power in 2015, we saw orchestrated efforts to counterbalance the critical studies with a new historical narrative.

What becomes very evident here is the dialectical nature of any process of reckoning with a difficult past. The more intensive the collective introspection into the troubled past, the stronger the ensuing attempts to defend a spotless self-image of the nation. This dynamic is true not only for Poland. In this sense, struggling with the wartime past seems a self-perpetuating, never-ending ebb-and-flow.

Natalia Aleksiun: There is, indeed, a sense of a pendulum as far as the Polish public discourse is concerned, in which Poland is supposed to regain a sense of pride located in its heroic history. Many politicians have employed a notion of the country in need of 'getting up from its knees.' This means: no longer apologizing for nor even acknowledging any dark past. Was this drawing a line a response to Jan T. Gross's *Neighbors*, and later the in Poland anxiously anticipated *Fear* and *Golden Harvest*?[16] Was this pushback a result of the discussion having left the confines and the safety of the academic ivory

tower? After it was first published in Polish, Gross's *Neighbors* sold at gas stations; it was read and discussed widely. Today, the most widely discussed aspect of the Holocaust seems to be the heroism of the Polish Righteous among the Nations.[17] But then, are historians really obligated to examine the difficult past 'responsibly,' mindful of collective feelings in order to avoid a powerful backlash, utilized and further mobilized by right-wing politicians? I believe this is not our task: who would then draw the line on how much of the dark past is the general public ready to face? The case of Poland raises questions for Ukraine. We do not know the way and the degree to which the current war against Ukraine may affect writing about the history of the Holocaust and the place of Ukrainians in it. Survivors from East-Central Europe recall Ukrainians – individually and collectively – as collaborators, sometimes commenting they were 'worse than the Germans.'[18] In the context of the current war, scholars analyzing the past may be tempted to seek a difficult balancing act: a careful foregrounding of their historical sources and public history.

Magdalena Waligórska: I think this is a very important point that you are raising here. Over the last months, we have seen the extent to which Russia's propaganda has referenced the Second World War to justify its aggression on Ukraine. Similar attempts have been made on the part of the Lukashenka administration in Belarus, which is now attempting a top-down remodeling of the national historiography of the Second World War through the framework of the 'Genocide of the Belarusian Nation,' which subsumes the Holocaust into a narrative of Belarusian suffering. To what extent do you believe that the war in Ukraine, and the war propaganda that comes with it, will impact our field of research in the nearest future?

Yechiel Weizman: First of all, I believe that the constant references to the Second World War in Russia's propaganda and the uses and abuses of the history and memory of the Nazi terror and the Holocaust make it clear that history matters, and that we should take heed of the dangers of manipulating history and memory. This propagandistic war proves that historians cannot avoid dealing with the questions of collective memory and should be more attentive to the various ways through which traumatic memories are being used as a weapon. In many ways, this conflict should make historians realize that they have a crucial public role – not only to teach us what happened in the past, but also to articulate what is happening now, and how the past plays a central role in shaping the present and justifying violence. I believe that we, as historians of the Second World War and the Holocaust, should also reflect on our own role as researchers and teachers and try to learn how to maneuver in this minefield.

It is not the first time that the memory of the Second World War and the Holocaust, and the history of antisemitism, are being invoked in international conflicts in order to gain moral credibility and justify crimes. But facing the current brutal abuse of history in Putin's Russia, I can see how more and more Israelis are becoming aware of the grave danger of weaponizing antisemitism and the memory of the Holocaust, and are learning to detect how certain dictums and rhetorical traps function as a means to obscure history and legitimize state violence.

Although it is still too soon to predict how the current war will affect the way we understand and remember the Holocaust, we can already see now how the war is

reinforcing specific ideological readings of the past and strengthening certain trends in the public perception of the history of the war. In Poland and other post-communist countries, Russia's aggression seems to have reinvigorated attempts to downplay to role of the Red Army in the fight against the Nazis. Several memorials of Red Army soldiers have recently been vandalized in Poland and there are even suggestions to raze war cemeteries of Soviet soldiers. One can also observe how Russia's invasion of Ukraine sits well with recent state-sponsored attempts across East-Central Europe to stress Soviet war crimes and equate them with Nazi Germany's terror, under the paradigm of 'double genocide.' We can only assume then that the notion of 'Bloodlands' as a framework to understanding Europe's bloody twentieth century will gain more centrality – as Putin's Russia is widely being perceived as heir to the Stalinist dictatorship. It remains to be seen how these growing sensibilities will shape the future direction of Holocaust studies – whether the current atrocities will increase our sensitivity to ongoing mass violence and inform attempts to research parallels and continuities between the Holocaust and other genocides, or whether we will witness a renewed denial of local involvement in the Nazi genocide and the glorification of wartime criminals, aided by growing anti-Russian and anti-Soviet sentiments. What is pretty obvious is that the field of Holocaust research will not, and perhaps should not, remain unaltered by what is happening in Ukraine now.

Magdalena Waligórska: Belarus is obviously heavily impacted by the war in Ukraine. However, it is also, at the same time, a country that suffers from the most severe limitations in terms of freedom of speech and scientific freedom. To what extent does the war change the situation for historians in Belarus today?

Franziska Exeler: In an ironic twist, I think that Russia's war against Ukraine has actually helped to draw attention to the political situation in Belarus. The fact that the Lukashenka government is complicit in Russia's attack (given that Russian troops marched from Belarusian territory into Ukraine), combined with the severe limitations on the freedom of speech that Putin's government introduced in Russia in early March of 2022, has led international commentators and analysts to ask not just about the effects of the war on Russian society, but also on Belarusian society. Over the last decade, the atmosphere in Belarus always struck me as much more repressive than in Russia, with people having to make compromises, big and small, on an everyday basis.

In contrast to Russia (before 2022, that is), in university seminars in Belarus, it was clear that certain topics were off limits: not just painful questions relating to the years of Nazi occupation (such as incidents of violence committed by Soviet partisans against civilians in Belarus), but also relating to Soviet history. Among those off-limit topics were the true extent of the Soviet repressions in the 1930s, the suffering that the collectivization of agriculture brought to the rural population, and the Soviet annexation of eastern Poland in 1939, which is declared in Belarusian history books a liberation from Polish rule (an old Soviet narrative and one that appears strikingly similar to how the Russian government today tries to legitimize its attack on Ukraine, as a liberation from 'Ukrainian Nazis').

All of this has gotten worse – though not so much after Russia's attack on Ukraine, but following the large protest movement against Lukashenka's re-election in August 2020. The Belarusian government has tried to discredit the symbol of the protest movement

– the white-red-white flag – by declaring it to be a fascist symbol. In doing so, the government is discursively connecting the protest movement to the memory of the Second World War, stigmatizing anyone who opposes the government as a Nazi collaborator.

Recently, the government in Belarus has even gone a step further. It has introduced two new laws, which effectively enable the state to prosecute individuals for any statements on the history of the Second World War that deviate from the very one-dimensional state-enforced narrative of the Second World War.[19] This state narrative of Belarus as the place where the 'all people's partisan war' took place knows no gray zones between good and evil. Closely resembling Soviet practice, it presents the Soviet partisan movement in Belarus as a mostly male, ethnic Belarusian or at best an East Slavic undertaking. In doing so, it downplays the substantial contribution of female partisans, and marginalizes the wartime experience of Jewish and Polish inhabitants of Belarus as both victims and resisters. Historians who are critical of this narrative, who call for a more complex and nuanced analysis of the history of the Second World War in Belarus not only run the risk of being professionally sidelined, unable to pursue a career in state institutions. They are now at real risk of criminal prosecution, which is a dramatic new development.

Natalia Aleksiun: I would like to add a note about one more important shift in how historians examine the Holocaust in East-Central Europe. In the context of the war in Ukraine and Russian war propaganda, scholars, especially Ukrainian historians, face a challenge that is not entirely new but that has certainly become more acute. When exploring questions of collaboration (broadly defined) during the Second World War, they may appear to be aligning themselves with Putin's propaganda. Yet, the work of scholars like Marta Havryshko and Yuri Radchenko is vitally important – they not only contribute to Holocaust scholarship at large but create an opportunity for a new public discourse in their country.[20]

Notes

1. See Gross, *Fear*. For the study of one town and Jewish return see: Krzyzanowski, *Ghost Citizens*.
2. Fink, *A Scrap of Time,* 103–6.
3. Adler, *Survival on the Margins.*
4. Jockusch, *Collect and Record!*
5. https://www.lvivcenter.org/en/. The project is titled 'The Most Documented War.'
6. On different responses to traumatic events: Kirmayer, Lemelson and Barad, "Introduction."
7. For insightful reflections on the purpose of remembering, but also why some survivors would prefer silence: Winter, "Thinking about Silence."
8. See, for example, Sander, *Doing Justice to History*; Simpson, *Law, War and Crime*. For a study that deliberates these questions from a historical perspective, focusing on the Soviet role at the 1945–46 Nuremberg trial: Hirsch, *Soviet Judgment at Nuremberg*.
9. See, for example, Fletcher and Weinstein, "Violence and Social Repair"; Stover, *The Witnesses*; Stover and Weinstein, *My Neighbor, My Enemy*.
10. Szymborska, "The End and the Beginning," 48–9.
11. On the Soviet politics of retribution, see, for example, Voisin, *L'URSS contre ses traîtres*; Exeler, *Ghosts of War.* On Poland: Kornbluth, *The August Trials.*
12. See Janicka, "Obserwatorzy uczestniczący zamiast świadków." For the discussion of educational challenges see Ambrosewicz-Jacobs, "The Uses and the Abuses of Education."

13. Grabowski, "Rewriting the History of Polish-Jewish Relations."
14. See, for example: Koposov, *Memory Laws, Memory Wars*; Kasianov, *Memory Crash.*
15. See: Prusin, "The 'Second Wave' of Soviet Justice"; Sklokina, "Trials of Nazi Collaborators."
16. Gross, *Sąsiedzi i inni.*
17. See Grabowski and Grimm, "The Holocaust and Poland's 'History Policy'"; Grabowski and Libionka, "Bezdroża polityki historycznej"; Podbielska, "Toruńskie Yad Vashem."
18. See Aleksiun, "No Ordinary Neighbors."
19. Ackermann, "'Der Genozid am Belarusischen Volk'."
20. See Havryshko, "Listening to Women's Voices"; Radchenko, "The OUN-M, Collaboration, and the Holocaust"; Radchenko, "The Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists."

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