Jews, Poles & Nazis: The Terrible History

Timothy Snyder

Remembering Survival: Inside a Nazi Slave-Labor Camp by Christopher R. Browning, Norton, 375 pp., $27.95

Zydu z w sixtniwnej Warszawie (Jews in Insurrectionary Warsaw, 1944) by Barbara Engelking and Dariusz Libikowicz, Polish Center for Holocaust Research, 358 pp., $24.00

The hangings took place on the last day of August 1941, on the town square of Wierzbnik, in what had once been a bustling Jewish town. The hangings had passed without notice in the joint German-Soviet invasion that had destroyed the Polish state; ten weeks before, the Germans had betrayed their ally and invaded the Soviet Union. Wierzbnik, home to Poles and Jews, lay within the General Government, a colony that the Germans had made from parts of their Polish conquests. As Poles left church that Sunday morning, they saw before them a gallows. In the town square, the Germans had selected sixteen or seventeen Poles—men, women, and at least one child. Then they ordered a Jewish execution crew, brought from the ghetto that morning, to carry out the hangings. The Poles were forced to stand on stools, then the Jews placed nooses around their necks and kicked the stools away. The bodies were left to dangle.

Demonstrative killing of civilians was one of several German methods designed to stifle Polish resistance. The Germans had murdered educated Poles: tens of thousands in late 1939, thousands more in early 1940. Since June 1940, the Germans had been sending suspected Poles to Auschwitz and other camps. Polish society was to be reduced to an undifferentiated mass of passive workers. German policy toward Jews was different, though the nature of the difference was not yet clear. Jewish elites had been preserved; some of them as members of the Judenrat (Jewish council) or as policemen directing the local affairs of Jews in a way that suited Germans. Although fatality rates in some ghettos were high, Jews in summer 1941 had little idea that they had been gathered into ghettos in preparation for a “Final Solution.” The Germans had first planned to deport the Jews to a reservation in eastern Poland, or to the island of Madagascar, or to Siberian wastelands. As these schemes proved impracticable, the Jews remained in the ghettos. It was in that final week of August 1941 that the German “Final Solution” was taking on its final form: mass murder. Two days before the hangings at Wierzbnik, the Germans had completed their first truly large-scale murder of Jews, shooting some 25,000 Jews in the Treblinka-Bełzec-Oświęcim area in occupied Soviet Ukraine.

“I knew I had the right people,” one of the Jewish hangmen in Wierzbnik recalled more than fifty years later. He thought that those who were executed belonged to the Polish Home Army, and as such were guilty of murdering Jews. The people in question died, of course, not because Poles were killing Jews, but because Poles were resisting German rule. The hangings at Wierzbnik were a typical German reprisal, aiming to spread terror and deter further opposition. If it were not for the testimonies of the Jews from Wierzbnik, this particular event would have been lost. For most of them, it was a first stark demonstration of German mass murder, if only a small foretaste of what was to come.

In his magnificent and humane microhistory, Christopher Browning has drawn on the “written, transcribed, and/or taped accounts of 522” Jewish survivors, most of them from Wierzbnik, who shared a similar experience of the war. He treats these testimonies as historical sources, believing that according to them “a privileged position subject to the same critical analysis and rules of evidence as other sources will merely discredit and undermine the reputation of Holocaust scholarship itself.” Here, in recounting how a Jew forced by Germans to kill Poles blamed the Poles for their fate, Browning reaches the problem of Polish-Jewish relations. While he is quite aware that this particular testimony must be subjected to scrutiny, his analysis consists mainly in the comparison of multiple Jewish testimonial sources. Addressing the evidence of the Jewish hangman, Browning characterizes the Home Army as a “conservative nationalist underground movement” that did indeed kill Jews, but perhaps not at early as 1941. This description may reflect a consensus among surviving Wierzbnik Jews; it does not fit the historical Home Army.

Interestingly, the “Polish underground” makes several appearances in Browning’s book, usually behaving in ways that are remembered positively shooting Germans, attacking camps, helping Jews. The Home Army, meanwhile, appears in this negative light, as murderous and anti-Semitic. There is a problem here: the Home Army was the Polish underground. Aiming to restore Polish independence from German rule, it united hundreds of resistance groups. It represented a very wide spectrum of opinion, excluding only the communist left and the extreme national right. And it was not just an underground movement: it was an integral part of the Polish armed forces. Under the command of the exile government in London, allied with Great Britain and the United States in the war against Nazi Germany.3

Although the Home Army’s enemy was Nazi Germany, anti-Semitism was indeed a problem in its ranks. On Rosh Hashanah, three weeks after the hangings in Wierzbnik, Polish Prime Minister Władysław Sikorski sent his good wishes from London to the Jewish citizens of Poland via the BBC. Stefan Rowecki, the commander of the Home Army in Warsaw, was irritated; such gestures, he thought, made “the impression of favoring Poles. This revealed a basic tension, apparent throughout 1941, between the Polish exile government and its underground army, Anti-Semitism, Rowecki seemed to think, was so pervasive that the Jewish issue should be tabled until war’s end. Many Poles had been inclined to support anti-Semitic parties in the 1930s, and the experience of German and Soviet occupation had not helped.4 The situation was complicated by the Jews who had taken up positions of authority in the Soviet occupation apparatus in eastern Poland between 1939 and 1941, after the Soviet invasion of that part of the country. Other Poles were corrupted by having taken over Jewish houses or apartments when Jews were forced into ghettos in 1940 and 1941. Throughout 1941, Poles were debating the political and civic status that they wished to assign to Jews after the war. The exile government took the view that postwar Poland would be a democracy without racial discrimination. Within the government, however, nationalists questioned this position.

Polish wartime debates about the “Jewish question” ceased only when Adolf Hitler’s answer became clear. The condition of Polish Jews became a pressing question for the exile government and the Home Army when the Germans began to gas Jews in the final weeks of 1941. In early 1942, Polish leaders believed that news of the extermination camps would prompt action from Great Britain and the United States. The Home Army thought that the revelation of the existence of gassing facilities would force the Germans to stop. They transmitted to London the documentation about the death factory at Chelmno that had been gathered by the ghetto historians Emanuel Ringelblum. This led to BBC broadcasts about the mass extermination of Polish Jews. The Polish government in London, though always presenting Jewish suffering as part of a larger story of Polish martyrdom, gave the mass murder of Jews a reason for the British and the Americans to carry out their own exterminations of concentration camps. In vain: the Germans were not swayed by the publicity, and the Western allies took no meaningful action.5

In 1942, in Operation Reinhard, the Germans deported some 300,000 Polish Jews from ghettos in the General Government to death factories at Treblinka, Belzec, and Sobibor. The assoc-

1On Christopher Browning’s evidence, the hangings had taken place one week earlier.


3It was known as the Union of Armed Struggle through 1941. The Polish government left Paris for London in 1940.


The major Jewish armed rebellion against German rule in the General Government, the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of April-May 1943, had aimed not at survival but rather at the choice of the manner of death. It involved a certain alliance between Poles and Jews, but one that did not endure. The Warsaw branch of the Home Army had given Jews a substantial part of its modest weapons caches. Seven of the first eight armed actions taken by the Home Army in Warsaw were in support of the ghetto. This was symbolic: as everyone knew, the Home Army in Warsaw could not have saved the Jews of the ghetto in April 1943, even had it devoted all of its troops and weapons to this purpose. After the Ghetto Uprising was crushed, Home Army commanders failed to enlist surviving Jewish fighters. Thus even Jews with combat experience found themselves hunted in occupied Poland in 1943. Jews had to fear not only the Germans, but also local units of the Home Army who (on several documented occasions) shot them as bandits or (on a few documented occasions) shot them to steal their belongings.

From the perspective of the Home Army, 1943 was the year of an irresolvable dilemma: the Germans were losing the war, but the Soviets were winning it. In February the Red Army had dealt the Wehrmacht its first major defeat, at Stalingrad. Henceforth, the Home Army had to resist the Germans while preparing for the arrival of the Soviets. German propaganda drove the point home that April, revealing that the Soviets had shot thousands of Polish officers at Katyn. Stalin used the revelation of his own massacre as a pretext to break diplomatic relations with Poland. This was an unmistakable sign of imperial ambition. If Stalin would not recognize the legitimate Polish government during a common war against Nazi Germany, why would he endorse Polish independence after a Soviet victory?

Some Home Army commanders feared that arming Polish Jews would ease the spread of Soviet power. Though this sometimes took the form of an anti-Semitic stereotype of the Jew as Communist, the concern was not entirely unjustified. The Polish Communist party was part of the Jewish Combat Organization, which the Home Army had supplied with arms. The man who negotiated those arms transfers, Aryan Wilner, was also negotiating with Communists. The Jewish representative within the Polish government department charged with rescuing Jews, Adolf Berman, was also in touch with the Communists. (His brother Jakub would later preside over the Communist...
security apparatus that persecute Home Army veterans—"including those who had aided Jews."

For the Home Army, the Soviet advance meant the arrival of a dubious ally against the Germans as well as an impeding one. The Jewish Partisans, with whom the Home Army had no relations with Jews meant life. This basic difference in perspectives, as a result of the Holocaust, was difficult to overcome.

For Jews at Starachowice, only labor counted. As Browning masterfully details in his vivid portrait of the factory camps, he reveals what Jews knew about their fate and the limits of their local perspective. When typhus broke out, for example, the Germans at Auschwitz were shocked at how Jews managed to survive. So long as Jewish labor was available for rent from the SS, shooting sick Jews was the economically rational thing to do. As the war continued and the number of living Jews plunged, the Germans replaced Jewish workers with Jews rather than killing them. Jews remembered this as a change in the camp regime; Browning reveals the larger causes.

In late 1943, Heinrich Himmler liquidated the camp at the General Government where Jews were used as labor, and had tens of thousands of Jewish workers shot. The directors of Starachowice sacrificed some of the women and children to Himmler, but preserved the women at Auschwitz. The way the Germans were making arms, they could evade the policy of murdering all Jews. Only the Red Army's successful offensive in June 1944 forced the closure of the factory camps at Starachowice. In July the Jews from Auschwitz were sent to Auschwitz. Mortality rates in one of the railcars was high, but not only because of the transport conditions; some of the stronger prisoners took the opportunity to beat the members of the camp council to death.

The Red Army was disarming Home Army units as it entered eastern Poland. The Red Army was only a short time to be an uprising against the Germans in Warsaw, timed to exploit the Soviet advance but precede the actual arrival of Soviet troops. The aim was to liberate Warsaw from German occupation by Polish efforts, and to install a Polish government before the Red Army arrived. In late July 1944, as the Wierzbnik Jews were sent to Auschwitz, the Red Army approached Warsaw. On August 11, 1944, the Warsaw Uprising began. The Home Army fought the Germans there for eight weeks: a longer battle than either the Polish campaign of 1939 or the French campaign of 1940. With such a commitment to both. As Dariusz Libionka and Barbara Engelnking demonstrate in their pioneering study, Jews took part in the battle, in both of the Home Army. Some of these were people of Jewish origin who regarded or presented themselves as Poles and had been in the Home Army all along. Others were veterans of the Ghetto Uprising. More were survivors who left their places of the Warsaw Uprising. Seeing it as self-evident that they would help Poles fight Germans. As Michal Zylberberg put it, "The Poles had risen to fight against the mortal enemy, and it was our obligation, as victims and as fellow citizens, to help them."

The Warsaw Uprising was a failure, but it did succeed in delaying the German advance until World War II. Indeed, it is quite possible that more people of Jewish origin took part in the Warsaw Uprising of 1944 than in the Ghetto Uprising of 1943.

Some Jews who took part in the Ghetto Uprising before it was defeated. The Home Army, like the Jews the previous year, fought essentially alone. Stalin favored Allied air drops when they might have helped. The Poles were on the other hand, on the line at the Vistula River, and the Red Army halted. Some of the most brutal German SS and police formations defeated the Polish resistance in Warsaw, killing at least 120,000 Polish civilians. These prophecies are prophetic because German forces were ordered to kill them, but also because Joseph Stalin allowed them to die. The Red Army was indeed halted by the stubborn German defense in the General Government. And its encirclement there for five months must be understood as a political act. It doomed the Poles (and the Jews) who were fighting the Germans in Warsaw. The Germans killed people who, as Stalin knew, would have also resisted the imposition of Communist rule.

The Germans were able to employ not only Starachowice, but also the last ghetto in occupied Poland, in Lodz. In July 1944, Lodz Jews knew they were facing a death sentence and thought they could be liberated in a matter of days. Some 67,000 Jews were transported from Lodz to Auschwitz while the Warsaw Uprising was taking place. The Wierzbnik Jews were not subjected to a selection at the ramp at Birkenau, most of the Lodz Jews were gassed upon arrival.8

By the time the Red Army finally reached Warsaw in January 1945, the Wierzbnik Jews were exhausted and other Jews were being marched from Auschwitz to labor camps in Germany, where they would remain until the end of the war. This order was deadlier for the Wierzbnik Jews than Starachowice. When the Red Army arrived, it took a matter of a few months. After the Red Army took Berlin in May, Polish-Jewish survivors found their way to displaced-persons camps in Germany. A few were able to return to Poland and their hometown, where they were greeted with ugly threats from the Poles who had stolen their houses. In June a few hundred were murdered by Poles. One Jew was beheaded. In Poland as a whole, hundreds of Jews were murdered by Poles in the months after the war was over.

Browning concludes from this horrible final that the goal of the Polish underground was the end of Jewish life in Poland. He adds that the Polish nation was defined by an opposition to the German enemy in the image of the Jew. As Browning acknowledges, it is not at all clear that members of the Home Army committed the murders and robberies.


*One of these was Władysław Bartoszewski (1922-), a fascinating figure who was a scholarly biography.

*The (nationalist) National Armed Forces and the (Communist) People's Army also fought in the Warsaw Uprising.

In Wierzbnik, the Jews upon whose testimony Browning reliability could not have known this. However that may be, it is misleading to discuss Polish political aims only in the light of these events. If Polish patriotism was simply a means of reconciling Jews, why did the Home Army fight the Nazis with such determination?

Officially, the Home Army was fighting for constitutional liberal democracy and equal rights for all citizens; what it meant, of course, was that democratic elections would have brought to Poland we will never know. After intimidation campaigns and fake elections, Poland became a Soviet satellite governed by a Communist regime. We lose the description of the Home Army as a reactionary nationalistic clique to Soviet and Polish Communists, whose forces defeated its stubborn remnants, tortured its best officers, and hanged its last leader during a show trial.

In Stalinist Poland, only Communist resistance to the Germans was recognized as such; everything else was fascist. Communists had no difficulty when they had to contend with the people who had fought the communists with the Nazis themselves. The Ghetto Uprising was celebrated as Communist (though it was not); the Warsaw Uprising was denounced as fascist (though it was not). Yet we need to ask why the interpretation of the two events to national as well as to Communist politics. The Ghetto Uprising is a founding myth of the State of Israel, and the Warsaw Uprising is a founding myth of today's post-Communist Poland. Too long have we allowed the two events further apart in memory than they were in history.

Though the record of the Home Army toward Jews is ambivalent, the dates of the Uprising are important. It is important as Jewish testimonial material is to the history of the Holocaust, the recollections of Jews who spent years in camps cannot serve as the basis for historical reckonings with the Home Army. If it was, we might have to include those of people such as Chaja and Estera Borenstein, who volunteered as nurses at the beginning of the Warsaw Uprising, or Marian Trzeciak, who was sent to rescue Polish comrades right at its very end. It would have to allow for the experiences of Jews such as Stanisław Aronson. Fighting in the most celebrated unit of the Warsaw Uprising, Aronson stormed Umschlagplatz, from which he himself had been deported to Treblinka two years before. Then he and his Polish comrades liberated a concentration camp on the ruins of the Warsaw Ghetto, and freed several hundred Jews.

That said, the pristine legend of an unbloodied Home Army, cultivated by Polish veterans and patriots, is also unsustainable. There is no evidence that there was a conflict between soldiers in the field and declarations from London, variation among regions and units, reluctance to see Jews as part of the Polish nation, insensitivity to the particular dangers faced by Jews, and occluded accounts of right murder. Getting the balance right is not just a matter for Jews and Poles. The Home Army was the most significant non-Communist resistance movement in the Warsaw Uprising, yet those who regard opposition to Hitler as a measure of morality will have to take its history seriously.