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### Collaboration in Belorussia during the Second World War and its Place in German Occupation Politics, 1941-1944

This dissertation analyzes various forms of local collaboration in Byelorussia during the period of Nazi occupation (1941-1944). The central themes in the work are: the attitude toward local collaboration on the part of the occupation authorities; the factors that defined that attitude; the place the latter were ready to allocate to collaborationist bodies in the occupation policies and the motives that drew some of Byelorussians to side with the Germans. The dissertation shows that despite the marginalization of the phenomenon of local collaboration in postwar research, it was quite an important element of Byelorussian landscape under the occupation.

Since collaboration was not unique to Byelorussia the work opens with the brief survey of the collaborationism in Nazi-occupied Europe. It is shown that in the occupied countries of both Western and Eastern Europe the readiness to collaborate with the occupiers stemmed from the political, social, ethnic and intellectual crises that plagued Europe in the period between the two World Wars as well as from the misunderstanding of the very nature of the National-Socialist regime.

At the same time it is shown that while the Nazis were quite aware of the tensions existing in various countries intended as targets to their aggressive plans, they still did not see in the local collaboration a factor to be reckoned with in their prewar planning. Only confrontation with reality in various occupied countries, in the first place confrontation with the lack of German manpower to effectively administer the conquered areas led to the permitting of local collaborationism. It was hardly a question of partnership. From the start, the attitude of the German occupying authorities was a utilitarian one. The local collaborationist bodies were seen by the Germans first and foremost as mere recipients and executioners of their orders as well as auxiliary tools in

control over the country's populations. They were also used to exploit the resources of various countries for the German military effort. Neither in the West nor in the East were collaborators treated by the Germans as equals. Even in the face of the impending fall of their "thousand-year Reich" the Nazis continued to stick to their dogmatism and to the tenet of the Herrenvolk.

It is, nevertheless, possible to point out some differences in the German attitude toward local collaboration in Western vis-à-vis Eastern Europe. These differences were based in the first place upon the place that various countries should occupy in the future German-dominated "New Europe" as well as upon the racial value of the peoples inhabiting this or another country. In Western European countries, especially in those where the populations were defined as "Germanic" according to the Nazi racial scale, the local bodies engaged in collaboration had a wider freedom of action than was the case in Poland. It was especially true in the occupied Soviet territories which were seen by Nazi planners as part of Lebensraum. There they had no freedom of action.

The motives as well as the forms in which collaboration proceeded were also somewhat different in Western vs. Eastern Europe. First, it would be wrong to limit the phenomenon to a certain social class or to the fascist or fascist-like movements. The case of Denmark shows that even those parties that in the interwar period were seen as pillars of a democratic regime could engage in collaboration with the occupiers without many scruples. Even communists, portrayed by Marxist historiography as the chief driving force behind the "anti-fascist movement" too were not immune. Although in all the occupied countries the motives for collaboration ranged from the unconditional identification with Nazi goals and slogans to the using of collaboration as cover for subversive activities, here too the certain differences existed between the East and the West. In the West, where Nazis did not confront the populations at once with brutal force, the choice between collaboration and resistance, at the start of the occupation at least, was not so straightforward and the option of a neutral stance was not impossible. In Poland and especially in the occupied Soviet territories where almost from the beginning Germans proceeded with brutality the choice between collaboration and resistance very quickly became a matter of sheer physical survival.

While in the occupied countries of both Western and Eastern Europe it is possible to speak about the variety of forms of collaboration such as political, military, police, here too some differences existed. It is quite reasonable to speak about economic collaboration (which expressed itself in the participation of local economic bodies in supplying the German war-machine with all the necessary goods, in their assistance in exploiting local material and human resources as well as in the attempts to participate

in the exploitation of “occupied Eastern territories”) in Western European countries, it is very difficult to do so in the case of occupied Polish and Soviet territories, since the very term “economic collaboration” implies at least some degree of mutual profit and in the latter case the possibility of any profit was excluded from the outset.

In Byelorussia, as in other occupied countries, the readiness of the local population to collaborate with the Germans during the occupation stemmed to a very large degree from the developments which preceded Nazi invasion. Byelorussia was divided between Poland and the Soviet Union for most of the interwar period. The Western, Polish part of Byelorussia which in the 1920s-1930s together with Western Ukraine was known as Kresy Wschodnie (“Eastern District”) was plagued by ethnic tensions. Almost from the beginning of its existence, the Polish Republic adopted an assimilationist course toward its national minorities. The assimilation was accompanied by colonization policies on the part of the Polish government as well as by large scale missionary activities of the Catholic Church among the predominantly Orthodox Byelorussian population. The protests from the Byelorussians were evaluated by the official Warsaw authorities as the result of Bolshevik propaganda coming from the East and were countered with harsh measures.

In the Soviet part of Byelorussia the policy of relative leniency toward the Byelorussian nationalism carried out in 1920s soon gave way to outright Sovietization of the area. Any manifestation of local nationalism was suppressed ruthlessly and was substituted by policies of outright Russification. The process of forceful collectivization in Byelorussia resulted in the deportation of between 12% and 15% of Byelorussian peasants who were defined as “kulaks” as well as in the starving to death of between 3% and 5% of the Byelorussian population. According to some data, the number of victims of Stalinist purges in Byelorussia reached two million people. The process of Sovietization had very grave social implications. It robbed Byelorussian society of its elite which could consolidate people in the hard times to come. It also led to the widespread atomization of the society and a readiness to comply with any directives coming from the authorities for the sake of its own profit and survival.

The existing tensions in Byelorussia were further augmented by the so-called “Reunion of Byelorussia” carried out in September 1939 in the aftermath of the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact (August 1939). The aggravation of the economic situation, the replacement of local forces with officials arriving from the East, from the “old Soviet areas”, and above all the waves of repression and deportation created quite widespread dissatisfaction and even outright hostility toward the Soviet rule.

When the Germans arrived in Byelorussia in June 1941 they found the real tangle of tensions that presented quite a fertile soil for collaboration. The Germans came to Byelorussia without any clear plans but with a well-established set of stereotypes and prejudices many of which existed in German society long before Hitler's rise to power. These prejudices played a very significant role in the Nazi occupation policies in Byelorussia as a whole and in the German attitude toward the local collaboration. Their major assumption was that Byelorussians were incapable of running their own state. Although, from the very beginning the occupying authorities were faced with the need of at least some degree of local collaboration, their policies as a whole hardly encouraged such collaboration. Germans did not conceal the main goal of their policies, namely squeezing war-important products and materials out of the country as much as possible and ensuring quiet in their area of responsibility. Even if not all of the people manning the occupying apparatus in Byelorussia were Nazi fanatics, the adherence to the tenet of *Herrenvolk vs. Untermenschen* still permeated all the Nazi policies in Byelorussia. This factor is of paramount importance for understanding the German policies in Byelorussia.

The measure to which the local population was ready to collaborate or cooperate with the German authorities depended very much upon the fulfillment of its expectations from these authorities. Arguably the central place among these expectations was occupied by the hope for agrarian reform that traditionally was a central issue in the area. The "New Agrarian Order" proclaimed with great pomp at the beginning of 1942 was, however, by no means such a reform. Its main purpose was to make the exploitation of the agricultural production of Byelorussia more effective.

Even if Byelorussia was hardly abundant with resources, the Germans did all they could to exploit to the utmost the country's available material and human resources. The reckless occupation policies in Byelorussia gave rise to the partisan movement which, with the time, became the second largest in Europe after Tito's in Yugoslavia. The German response took the form of the stick and the carrot. On the one hand the anti-partisan warfare took on the most brutal forms, while on the other various collaborationist projects were encouraged. They were supposed to dam the resistance movement. These projects included the expansion of the existing local police forces and the creation of "defensive villages".

As a whole German policies in Byelorussia were hardly favorable for the development of the broad collaborationist movement. Still it is possible to speak in Byelorussia of forms of collaboration such as the political, ideological, military (or police-military), collaboration of the Church as well as collaboration in the policies of repression.

Political collaboration in Byelorussia took a number of forms, beginning with the so-called "local self-administration" formed in the first days and weeks of the Nazi occupation and ending with the so-called "Byelorussian Central Council" called together in the last months of Nazi rule. All these forms could function only as far as the occupation authorities allowed this.

The "local self-administration" was allowed in Byelorussia as it was in the neighboring Ukraine, i.e. only up to the rayon level. The creation of this apparatus began at the very start of the Nazi invasion into the Soviet Union. Already the manning of this apparatus showed that the Germans were most interested in the perfect executioners of their will. Abstract criteria such as "great activity" and "spiritual mobility" clearly prevailed over the professional skills in manning the self-administrative apparatus. Moreover a great deal of opportunism was also displayed. Even former communist functionaries could find their way in this apparatus. In Western Byelorussia, Poles were initially a dominant element in the local self-administration although the fact that they were viewed with a great deal of suspicion by the German authorities.

It is not easy to provide exact numbers of the people who served in the local self-administration or to compile a complete list of motives which drove these people to join this apparatus. Generally it can be seen from the data used in the present work that in Byelorussia as well as in other occupied territories the local personnel greatly outnumbered the German personnel. The motives ranged from the belief in the possibility of building a Byelorussian state to the prosaic desire to get at least some job in the difficult economic situation.

The primary task of the local self-administration was to maintain "peace and order", to help the Germans in establishing control over the local population as well as to put local natural and manpower resources at the disposal of the German war-machine. The Germans never concealed their utilitarian attitude toward the local administrative apparatus. They did all they could to prevent the turning of the apparatus of the local self-administration into a unified, cohesive body that one day could claim power of government. The mutual spying and denunciations at various levels were only encouraged. Although toward the end of the occupation some voices in the occupation apparatus were heard suggesting the raising of the responsibility of the local administration, in practice the Germans spared no effort to retain full control over this administration.

The Byelorussian Popular Self-Aid Organization (BNS) presented another form of political collaboration. It was created at the beginning of the Nazi occupation of Byelorussia and was headed by Dr. Ivan Yermacenko. Although its official functions were

charitable ones, in reality the leadership of this organization saw it as no less than a germ of a future Byelorussian government. The organization, whose numerical strength was very vague, became a rallying point for chauvinist anti-Polish, anti-Russian and anti-Semitic elements. Although the organization was engaged in relief activities it is very difficult to establish the effectiveness of such activities as well as the influence the BNS had throughout the country. It is certain that the numerous cases of corruption in this organization as well as the mutual denunciations of its functionaries did not enhance its influence.

The German attitude to the BNS was more than ambiguous. On the one hand, the German authorities were certainly interested in the existence of an organization which would liberate them from the need to care about the hungry and the homeless and, at the same time, would probably improve the image of the Germans which suffered significantly as the occupation progressed. At the same time, Germans wanted to keep this organization within the framework of charity work, and they were sharply opposed to any sign of political ambition. The tragedy of the Byelorussian "Self-Aid Organization" lay in the fact that it found itself in the center of the struggle for power between the civil administration and the security apparatus. At first the organization certainly profited from this struggle but, ultimately, this precarious situation spelled its doom - particularly for its leaders' dreams about statehood.

Perhaps the most striking example of the German manipulative and hypocritical position toward local collaboration was the so-called Union of Byelorussian Youth or Sayuz Belaruskaj Moladzi, SBM for short in Byelorussian. The organization created in June 1943 was structurally almost an exact copy of the Hitlerjugend in Germany. The very creation and encouragement (up to a certain point, however) of the Union of Byelorussian Youth by no means resulted from the sympathy of the Germans toward the Byelorussian national idea. From the outset, Nazis first saw in it a tool for propaganda as well as the means to establish better control over Byelorussian youth, to shield it from Soviet propaganda and to exploit it for their own needs. Although publicly Germans spared no effort to express its sympathies toward the SBM's activities, during the whole period of the latter's existence they also spared no effort to manipulate this organization. The creation of the Einsatzgruppe "Deutschland" ("operational team 'Germany', supposed to recruit young Byelorussians for the work in Germany) showed clearly what exactly the Germans expected from the SBM. The Germans also did not shy from confronting the Byelorussian youngsters with their most dreadful projects, namely those of Germanization.

The creation of the Byelorussian Central Council or Belaruskaja Central'nja Rada in Byelorussian (BCR for short) at the very end of the Nazi occupation can be seen as a high point in the development of political collaboration in Byelorussia because here the difference in the goals between the collaborators and the German authorities could be seen most clearly. The weakening of the German grip toward the end of the occupation enabled BCR members not only to proclaim their particular aims, but also to pursue these aims, albeit only to a certain limit. It was actually the tragedy of those engaged in various forms of political collaboration that many, if not most of them, gave themselves the illusion that they in this or another way were participating in the process of Byelorussian state-building. They did not understand that they would be allowed freedom of action only insofar as it suited German interests.

On the other hand, German authorities in their attitude toward the BCR clearly showed once again their true attitude toward local political collaboration. Even on threshold of the defeat were they not only unable to view the local collaborators as partners, but were eager to put obstacles in their way. Even in the face of their fall, any mention of even a limited kind of independence was for them absolute anathema.

The Church, not only the Orthodox one in the Soviet territories, was a potential source of collaboration. What made it such a source were, first and foremost, the Soviet repressive religious policies themselves. Although a significant number of high Church hierarchs and lower-rank clergy both shared anti-Soviet sentiments, their collaboration with the German authorities was never blind. Many of them indeed were quite eager to participate with the Germans in measures such as the so-called *Sammelaktionen* (collection of goods needed by the German army) apparently genuinely believing that by so doing they were contributing to the war against the "godless Bolsheviks". But is it possible to define the role of the Orthodox Church as simply "aiding and abetting" the Germans as Soviet researchers did for many years?

A close analysis of the available sources proves that at least in Byelorussia the Orthodox Church's willingness to collaborate with the Germans had its limits. This willingness ended or at least weakened when the requested collaboration contradicted the Church's canons, traditions and public opinion. The Soviet historians spared no effort to demonstrate the "anti-national" (*antinarodnyj*) character of the Church activities but, in reality, the clergy was by no means deaf to the moods prevailing among its parishioners. Many priests were "sandwiched" between the German demands and the interests of their parishioners the interests of whom they were supposed to defend. At least some of them sincerely believed that by complying with certain German demands they could spare their parishioners even worse troubles.

The whole problem of Byelorussian autocephaly showed once again that the Germans were unable to rise above dogmatism and to see the real situation reigning in the occupied country. Supported by the Byelorussian chauvinists who saw themselves as the sole and true representatives of the Byelorussian people, the occupiers pushed for the proclamation of a Byelorussian Autocephalous Church completely ignoring the unpopularity in Byelorussia of such an idea as well as the lack of tradition of autocephaly in that country. Even the fact that a unilateral proclamation of autocephaly would contradict the Church canons did not deter people such as Generalkommissar Kube who dreamed of a personal realm with the Church in his pocket.

The ideological collaboration in Byelorussia was represented chiefly by the so-called “legal” press. From the German point of view it was first and foremost the tool to convey the desired ideas, mainly to encourage the cooperativeness of the local population that had been shaken as a result of reckless occupation politics. Moreover the legal mass media as a whole was also called to justify various unpopular measures of the authorities, such as brutal anti-partisan warfare, recruitment of labor for work in Germany and exploitation of the local economy. As in other forms of collaboration there was a variety of motives for being employed in the “legal” press and other mass media. For some people, work in the so-called legal mass media was simply a chance to continue their Soviet-time journalistic career. Since the Soviet mass media too were nothing but vehicles for propaganda these people were able to integrate themselves into the new frameworks quite smoothly. There was still another group of people such as those concentrated chiefly on the editorial staff of *Belaruskaja Hazeta*, people who identified themselves with the National-Socialist ideology. Before the German attack against the Soviet Union, however, this group had enjoyed but a minimal influence. But now writing for a newspaper such as *Belaruskaja Hazeta*, the circulation of which reached tens thousands of copies, certainly provided these people with an opportunity to make their voice heard.

The local collaborationist bodies also played an important role in the Holocaust. While the Germans undoubtedly were the main driving force behind the “Final Solution of Jewish Question”, the very number of the victims could lead us to the obvious conclusion that the Germans alone, without relying upon local assistance in every occupied country, were not able to accomplish murder on such a scale. The very pace of extermination process in Byelorussia shows that the public perception of the Jews played here a significant role. Thus in contrast to Western Europe, where the emancipation of Jews was in progress, in countries such as Byelorussia, which only one quarter-century before the Nazi invasion had been part of the Russian Empire the Jews

still were seen by many as an “alien element” and traditional anti-Semitism was not something exceptional.

For the Germans the local participation in anti-Jewish policies had both propagandistic and practical significance. On the one hand it enable them to present anti-Jewish measures as an expression of the popular will while on the other it made up for the lack of their own forces to carry out the extermination process. Indeed from the very beginning German bodies (especially the infamous Einsatzgruppen) entrusted with annihilation of Jews, were compelled to rely upon the assistance of the local inhabitants in apprehending the Jews.

The lack of almost any opposition on the part of the general public to the first anti-Jewish steps of the occupation authorities led to a significant escalation in the extermination policies that occurred from the late summer/autumn of 1941. A very important role in these policies was played by the “local self-administration” as well as by the local auxiliary police. The local self-administration figured prominently in all stages of the extermination process beginning with marking the Jews with “colored patches” and their ghettoization and up to their physical extermination. The same can be said of local policemen who oversaw directly the anti-Jewish measures preceding the mass-murders. They participated actively in the massacres and after these massacres were the first to enrich themselves from the property of the victims.

The local policemen participated in the massacres enthusiastically and displayed an excessive cruelty. The present dissertation assumes that anti-Semitism alone cannot explain such conduct. Additional factors, such as the desire to take possession of Jewish property or to prove one’s loyalty to Germans, “intoxication of power” and a natural sadism also played a prominent part in the decision to turn against those people who only recently had been neighbors, friends and sometimes even family members. Moreover the general perverted world with perverted values created by Nazi occupation must also be taken into consideration.

The collaboration in the persecution of Jews expressed itself not only in the denouncing them to Germans or participation in their physical extermination, but also in the misappropriation of Jewish property. This misappropriation proceeded both in a “wild” manner, by orgies of looting following the massacres and also in the form of “organized” or “quasi-organized” misappropriations carried out by local bodies. It is indeed very difficult to name one single body in occupied Byelorussia which did not profit in some or other way from the misappropriation of Jewish property.

The general attitude toward the anti-Jewish policies was not static. Whereas the attitude of the non-Jews toward the measures intended to rob the Jews of their civil rights could be described as neutrally-affirmative, the mass executions which claimed the lives of hundreds and thousands were sometimes met with condemnation. The dissertation assumes that one of the central motives for such condemnations was a fear about the next target of Nazi genocide.

One of the main reasons for the encouragement of local collaboration was the growth of the partisan movement in Byelorussia. Although up to 1942 this movement in Byelorussia was not a major factor, from the very beginning Germans were prepared to proceed with the most drastic measures against any sign of defiance. The brutal methods of the so-called anti-partisan warfare were neither an improvisation nor an overreaction produced by the nervousness resulting from a "besieged fortress" mentality, but rather a result of a traditional franc-tireurs complex dating back to the days of Franco-Prussian War of the end of 19th century as well as of racial dogmatism. They were planned even before the invasion into the Soviet Union, when it was by no means clear what the real conditions would be.

It would not be an exaggeration to state that the occupation opened anew a Pandora's Box of deep-seated conflicts and animosities. Like every other totalitarian regime, the Nazis also suspected enemies behind every tree. In the occupied "eastern territories" the term "enemy" was indeed a very loose concept. Jews, Poles, former members of the Communist Party, intelligentsia, and straggling Soviet soldiers - ultimately almost everybody was looked upon with suspicion. From the very outset, the Germans came to Byelorussia resolute on the one hand to be guided by stereotypes and dogmas rather than by reality and, on the other, to ready quell any real or imaginary resistance with brutal force. Eliminating ruthlessly all those who were merely suspected of supporting the partisans, not excluding women and children, the Nazis also created a whole host of local military or paramilitary units (many of them consisting of Soviet POWs) and projects such as the Wehrdörfer, the main purposes of which were to serve as cannon-fodder in anti-partisan warfare and to enable the sparing of "precious" Aryan blood as well as to assist the German authorities in controlling and exploiting their own country effectively. Of course, the occupation authorities refrained from making any clear promises to all those serving in these units. At the same time, they were slow to supply these units with all the necessary equipment hoping to get maximum cooperation for the minimum price.

It is not easy to compile a complete list of motives of all those who joined the local units fighting the partisans and who participated in the persecution of all those dubbed

“undesirable” by Germans. Hatred of the Soviet rule did not necessarily play a major role. In the case of Soviet POWs, the main motive was probably a prosaic desire to escape the appalling conditions of the prisoner-of-war camps. Some people were simply ready to fight any enemy that the rulers would point at. There were others, who became intoxicated with their power over the life and death of other people and who received a chance to give vent to their sadistic inclinations. The Germans were eager to heat up all the traditional conflicts, either social or national ones. In the case of Byelorussian-Polish relations, this led to a fully-fledged war, characterized by mutual incrimination and physical assaults.

The military collaboration in Byelorussia proceeded in various frameworks, such as auxiliary security forces, “Self-Defense”, the “Home Guard” and finally the Waffen SS Division. Military collaboration, like other forms of collaboration on the part of peoples living in the occupied Soviet territories treated in this work, was not taken into account from the outset. It was generally agreed between the NS hierarchs and military high commanders that the war against the Soviet Union would be over within a couple of weeks or in a few months at the most and then the time would come to realize the plans for the colonization and exploitation of the Ostraum: while the people inhabiting this area would be merely playthings shifted and shifted again according to the will of the German masters. Only the setbacks at the eastern front, especially from the winter 1941/1942 persuaded the Wehrmacht commanders before anyone else to change the approach according to which only Germans were allowed to bear weapons. According to various data in the autumn of 1941 the enlisting of Hilfswillige (Hiwis) in German front units began. To establish the semblance of order and to eliminate those defined as undesirables the Germans began the formation of local police units known as Ordnungsdienst and Schutzmannschaften. Later on the significant growth of the partisan movement led to the formation of additional military or paramilitary bodies such as “combat battalions” (Kampfbataillone) and Cossack hundreds. In the civil administration area the power struggles between Kube’s administration and the SS apparatus together with general worsening of the security situation gave birth to the “Byelorussian Self-Defense” (Samaakhova). At the end of 1943 when the Soviet Army had already knocked into the doors, Kube’s successor Kurt von Gottberg allowed the mobilization of the Byelorussian Home Guard (Krajova Abarona), which was supposed to cope with the ever-worsening general situation. When the “thousand-year Reich” was nearing its downfall, threatened by forces on the east, the west and the south those people who only a couple of years earlier had been viewed by the Nazis as sub-humans (Untermenschen) were allowed into Waffen-SS ranks and became the last bastion of Nazi Germany. Thus at the first glance we may get the impression that the real situation became stronger than dogmatism of die-hard Nazis.

Racial dogmatism, however, permeated the relationship toward various collaborationist military units during the whole occupation period and beyond. The fear that one day all those “eastern” units would turn the weapons given to them against the Germans was one of the main factors that defined the German attitude toward these units. When the Soviet side made every effort to strengthen the partisan movement, the Germans were extremely slow in supplying the local units taking part in anti-partisan warfare with even the most basic firearms. Moreover Reichsführer SS Himmler, who as head of the German police also had the last word in all matters pertaining to local police forces in the occupied “eastern territories”, was really obsessed with the idea that men serving in these forces, i.e. Untermenschen, would not look even outwardly like the policemen belonging to the Herrenvolk. Moreover, the special scale based on ethnic origin was introduced for the policemen of various nationalities of the former Soviet Union. Generally the local policemen were seen in the first place like walking and shooting machines rather than human beings made from flesh and blood. The belief in Herrenvolk vs. Untermenschen was kept intact until the very end. Even entering of the various Soviet nationalities into the Waffen-SS did not lead to dropping down of this tenet.

One topic treated in this dissertation stays somewhat aside, namely that of cooperation between German security organs and units of Polish Armija Krajowa at the last stages of German occupation of Byelorussia. Here was one of the few cases when Germans, albeit reluctantly, were compelled to suppress their traditional anti-Polish sentiments for the sake of the struggle against Soviet partisans, who was seen as a more serious threat. But even here this cooperation was not an easy one.

Generally the military collaboration is a good example of the German vacillation between racial dogmatism and the demands reality as well as of sheer opportunism. This, in fact, was true with respect to the Byelorussian collaborationism at large.