

NEGOTIATING JEWISH VICTIMHOOD AT MAJDANEK:
RELUCTANT COMMUNISTS, POLITICAL FLUX, AND NAZI GUILT

BY

ALANA HOLLAND

THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts in Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies
in the Graduate College of the
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2015

Urbana, Illinois

Master's Committee:

Professor Diane Koenker
Associate Professor David Cooper

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how questions of Jewish victimhood at the Nazi concentration and death camp Majdanek were negotiated by Poles and Soviets during the immediate post-liberation period in Lublin from July to October, 1944. After liberating eastern Poland, the Soviets established the Polish Committee for National Liberation (PKWN [Polski Komitet Wyzwolenia Narodowego]), the local Polish governing body that would replace the pre-war Polish government-in-exile in London (Rząd Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej na uchodźstwie) and secure a transition to communist rule in Poland. The immediate post-liberation period in eastern Poland was a time of political flux during which it was unclear whether a smooth transition to communism would occur. The Soviets and Poles remained ambiguous on several issues, especially on questions concerning Polish-Jewish relations. This study explores how a fluid and complicated immediate post-war political situation effected the erasure of Jewish suffering at Majdanek in the context of establishing communist rule in Catholic Poland, securing communist moral and political authority in the post-war world order, and upholding Soviet internationalist values. Soviet internationalism is examined through the lenses of competing domestic interests in early post-war Poland, providing a perspective on the development of early Polish-Soviet relations.

The Polish-Soviet Extraordinary Commission to Investigate German Crimes at Majdanek existed simultaneously with and mirrored other political developments in PKWN Poland. That is, it reflected an institutionally domestic creation to serve Polish interests but was under Soviet influence and its de facto authority. The chapters of this thesis show 1) the political developments in Lublin during the first days of liberation 2) the proceedings of the Polish-Soviet Commission and 3) the debates among members of the Commission on how to address Jewish victimhood and

other ethnic specificity, as well as an analysis of such representation in the Communique published by the Commission in the Soviet and Polish presses on September 16, 1944.

Ultimately, during this time of flux in the immediate period of liberation, Soviet Commission member Professor N. I. Grashchenkov, PKWN member and President of the Commission Andrzej Witos, and PKWN member of the Commission Dr. Emil Sommerstein represented the triangle of Soviet, Polish, and Jewish interests being carefully negotiated during this time, with the hierarchy of priorities in that order.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I could not have written this thesis without the support of the Russian, East European, and Eurasian Center at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. While pursuing an MA in Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies, I have grown immensely as a scholar during my time in the program. Guest lectures, interactions with professors and colleagues, events organized by the Center, and access to the wonderful Slavic collection in our library have been indispensable components of my education. I would like to extend my gratitude to the faculty associated with the Center for awarding me a 2014 Summer FLAS fellowship to study Polish in Lublin. This thesis would have been impossible without the opportunities for archival research and language study afforded me by this fellowship. A special thank you to Linda McCabe, Katrina Chester, and the staff at REEEEC, as well to Dr. Zsuzsa Gille for serving as our interim Director. I particularly thank our Associate Director, Alisha Kirchoff, for providing advice and encouragement at every step along the way during my studies.

Each course I have taken during my time at UIUC has informed my research and growth as a scholar in some way. I want to express my gratitude to Professors Valeria Sobol, Mark Steinberg, Harriet Murav, Diane Koenker, David Cooper, Carol Leff, Brett Kaplan, Konstantinos Kourtikakis and Drs. Oleksandra Wallo and Dmitry Tartakovsky for their constructive criticism and engaging courses. I would be lost as a researcher without the help of Kit Condill and Joe Lenkart in the Slavic Reference Service.

I extend a warm and special thank you to Professor Tamara Chaplin, my non-Russian/East European studies mentor of sorts, for encouraging me to look beyond disappointment and to always focus on doing the best work possible. Professor Ona Renner-Fahey remains a constant

source of inspiration and encouragement. I also thank my friends – especially Diana Sacilowski, Peter Wright, and Tyler Dolan – for their support in finding the right balance of fun and discipline. Professor Eugene Avrutin reviewed several drafts of my thesis proposal and was a great source of encouragement in the initial stages, and I also sincerely appreciate his positive feedback on navigating graduate studies.

I would like to extend a special note of gratitude to Ms. Marta Grudzińska who helped me tremendously while I researched through the Archives of the State Museum at Majdanek. Her assistance enabled me to navigate a complicated period in Polish history with relative ease, and I thank her for her patience and willingness to help.

Professor David Cooper has been a wonderful mentor while serving as the Director of REEEC and as my MA program advisor, and I warmly thank him for this. I have benefitted from his feedback and encouragement on numerous occasions and am happy to have shared many a laugh with him. I especially thank him for serving on my thesis committee, even while on sabbatical in Prague. He has always been generous with his time and has encouraged me to produce the best work possible while keeping larger goals in perspective. I thank him for his excellent feedback during all stages of progress on my thesis.

And finally, I owe much to Professor Diane Koenker, as I could not have produced this thesis without her simply wonderful help. Under her advising I have learned to grapple with tough research questions, and she has helped me articulate my ideas into readable and convincing form. I have been impressed with and grateful for her attention to detail and her *en pointe* feedback during the entire thesis process, including her close readings of several drafts. She has helped me grow as a student of history and has made me a better writer. She has given me the disciplinary and analytical tools to grow as a scholar, and I feel confident embarking upon a doctoral program

in history having benefitted from her direction. I warmly thank her for serving as my advisor and mentor.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER ONE: POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS IN LUBLIN DURING THE FIRST DAYS OF LIBERATION.....	11
CHAPTER TWO: THE POLISH-SOVIET EXTRAORDINARY COMMISSION TO INVESTIGATE GERMAN CRIMES IN THE AREA OF LUBLIN AT MAJDANEK.....	24
CHAPTER THREE: FROM <i>PROTOKOL</i> TO PRESS: DEBATING THE COMMUNIQUE ON NAZI ATROCITY AT MAJDANEK.....	43
CONCLUSION.....	69
EPILOGUE: APPREHENDING THE LOSS OF LUBLIN’S JEWS.....	75
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	83

INTRODUCTION

“On November 3, 1943, eighteen thousand four hundred persons were shot in the camp.”

Excerpt from the Communiqué of the Polish-Soviet Extraordinary Commission at Majdanek published in Pravda on September 16, 1944

“I know that on November 3, 1943, shootings of Jews happened.”

Excerpt from the Commission’s interrogation of the Polish political prisoner from August 24, 1944

After the film *Schindler’s List* won Best Picture at the Academy Awards in 1944, an opinion piece appeared shortly thereafter in the *New York Times* in response to the anticipated “Holocaust boom” in America. The boom happened. However, the author proceeded cautiously, understanding that monumental symbols sometimes help synthesize a popular conception of finality. In his words: “The art of remembering the Holocaust is by definition a work in progress. The moment that people start smugly pointing to long box-office lines and saying the job is done is the moment to worry that the world is beginning to forget.”¹ The film’s release coincided with an increase in research on the history of the Holocaust while also helping crystallize pre-existing popular understandings of Holocaust imagery and geography. That is, most research continued under western historiographical traditions for writing about the Holocaust, i.e., seeking to understand why it happened and arguing for its uniqueness, while the historic and artistic canons continued to perpetuate the camp imagery of gas chambers and crematoria. Auschwitz, which at the time was in Germany’s pre-war borders, remains the popular geographical focus with Jews from more western European lands as the primary victims.

Frank Rich’s 1994 piece on the “Holocaust boom” in its warning against perceiving Holocaust memory as completed so strikingly resembles – almost even seemingly anticipated – what was then published in 2009 in a *New York Review of Books* essay by Timothy Snyder in

¹ Frank Rich, “The Holocaust Boom,” *The New York Times*, April 7, 1994.

which he stated: “Auschwitz, generally taken to be an adequate or even a final symbol of the evil of mass killing, is in fact only the beginning of knowledge, a hint of the true reckoning with the past still to come.”² Snyder implored historians to do what, he argued, has not yet been done, calling for new studies to go “east of Auschwitz” to the areas on Soviet or Soviet-occupied territory where the Holocaust occurred, including several death camps in eastern Poland. One such death camp, Majdanek, is the subject of this thesis.

However, it would be unfair and inaccurate to conclude that the Holocaust east of Auschwitz has thus far been “an ignored reality.” While public understanding of the Holocaust actually does fit quite well with Snyder’s assessment, several scholars have produced large bodies of scholarship on the Holocaust in these areas. While the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum has only recently begun to deeply expand research and exhibitions to include the Holocaust on Soviet territory, scholars such as Zvi Gitelman and Mordechai Altshuler have been writing on the Holocaust in the Soviet context since the 1980s and 1990s, and Gitelman was one of the earliest scholars who tried to combat misconceptions that the Soviets simply ignored it.³ More recent scholarship in the past five years has enthusiastically expanded upon the same themes.

A general question exists among cultural scholars and historians of why the Holocaust does not have the same over-arching significance in Russia as it does in the West. This is a legitimate question, but it is often accompanied by the expectation that the Holocaust *should* occupy the same

² Timothy Snyder, “Holocaust: The Ignored Reality,” *The New York Review of Books*, July 16, 2009.

³ For examples of Western scholarship contributing to the stereotype of complete silence on the Holocaust in the Soviet Union, see Randolph Braham, ed., *Anti-Semitism and the Treatment of the Holocaust in Postcommunist Europe* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) and, especially, William Korey, *The Soviet Cage: Anti-Semitism in Russia* (New York: Viking, 1973). For an example of early work by Altshuler, see Mordechai Altshuler, *Soviet Jewry on the Eve of the Holocaust: A Social and Demographical Profile* (Yad Vashem: Jerusalem, 1998). Most of his earlier work on the Holocaust in the 1980s consisted of articles in the Hebrew journals, e.g., *Yalkut Moreshet* and *Pe’amin*, with a list available from <http://www.huji.ac.il/dataj>. For Gitelman see Zvi Gitelman, “History, Memory and Politics: The Holocaust in the Soviet Union,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 5, no. 1 (1990): 23-37 and “Soviet Reactions to the Holocaust,” in Lucjan Dobroszycki and Jeffrey Gurock, eds., *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1993), pp. 3-28.

space in the Russian (and previously Soviet) cultural sphere. But an understanding of Soviet history and the nature of the Holocaust in the east illuminates the reasons for why these expectations are misguided.⁴ It is true that there is no artistic representation or historic work of the Holocaust with such monumental iconic cultural status as Steven Spielberg's film, but at the time of its release Russia was engaging in a small Holocaust boom of its own. In 1992 the Russian Research and Educational Holocaust Center was established, and scholars such as Ilya Altman and Alla Gerber began work on a new Russian historiography of the Holocaust.

What then, one might ask, was the 'old' historiography? Generally, in the Soviet historiography the Nazi's annihilation of the Jews was referred to as *evreiskaia katastrofa* (Jewish catastrophe), with 'Holocaust' only being transliterated into Russian as *Kholokost* in the 1990s. That the Nazis specifically targeted Jews for annihilation and completely destroyed their communities was not denied, but it was not recognized as a unique phenomenon. Rather, it was addressed as an aspect of WWII encompassed in greater Soviet suffering. Jews were recognized as suffering alongside Belarussians and Ukrainians, for example, but the specific antisemitic nature inherent in Nazi ideology was generally not highlighted. Perhaps the most succinct characterization is that of "inconsistent silence."⁵ That is, what is now referred to as the Holocaust, defined as the unique and systematic state-sponsored genocide of Jews by Nazi Germany during WWII, was actually quite well documented and represented in the Soviet press and in cinematic and literary representation, but it was not interpreted as a uniquely Jewish tragedy.⁶ In Soviet

⁴ For an eloquent inquiry into Western critique of Soviet responses to the Holocaust, see Zvi Gitelman, "Politics and the Historiography of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union," in *Bitter Legacy: Confronting the Holocaust in the USSR* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), pp. 30-31.

⁵ For an elaboration on the general albeit quite inconsistent policy of silence regarding the Holocaust and its Jewish specificity, see Karel Berkhoff, "The Holocaust in the Soviet Media," in Michael David-Fox, Peter Holquist, and Alexander M. Martin, *The Holocaust in the East: Local Perpetrators and Soviet Responses* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2014), p. 84; Harvey Asher, "The Soviet Union, the Holocaust, and Auschwitz" in *ibid.*, p. 44; Karel Berkhoff, *Motherland in Danger: Soviet Propaganda during World War II* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 161; Gitelman, *Bitter Legacy*, p. 18.

⁶ For an in-depth study of this conclusion in the Soviet media, especially photography, see David Shneer, *Through Soviet Jewish Eyes: Photography, War, and the Holocaust* (New Brunswick, NJ, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2011); for

reporting on Nazi atrocity, the general trend was that Jews were not singled out, but they were not completely omitted. Moreover, after 1943 it became Soviet policy to actually identify Jewish victims as such more often if they were non-Soviet Jews, as Karel Berkhoff has shown.⁷ Yet at other times, usually when referring to Soviet Jews, they were completely erased.

Why Jewish suffering was generally either downplayed or erased has been discussed by several scholars. Some, such as Berkhoff, see the reasons for it as the result of antisemitism in the Soviet Red Army and in the Communist party, in general. Others, such as Harvey Asher, prefer to interpret it as a result of general Soviet policy on nationalities. He argues that it was done to avoid raising a “Jewish consciousness” that could halt Jewish assimilation into Soviet culture or disturb the “sense of unity and resolve that the invasion had created among the Soviet people.”⁸ And as all scholars dealing with this issue have mentioned, there was the risk that if Jewish suffering were highlighted, Soviet citizens might begin to perceive the war as a fight “for the Jews,” which might alienate other nationalities and dismantle the notion of ‘friendship of the peoples’, or, *druzhiba narodov*. All of these reasons assume a Soviet-domestic perspective in that they do not deeply explore why local Polish actors may have favored policy that appeared similar to Soviet goals on the surface for reasons independent of typical Soviet foreign policy considerations. Of course, underlying Soviet strategy should not be dismissed, but a more productive approach might be to consider that perhaps the Soviets sometimes felt compelled to abandon their own norms (i.e., for wartime propaganda aims or for fulfilling nationalities policy) to accommodate the interests of others for a greater political goal. In cases of the media portrayal of Jews during the Holocaust,

cinema, see Jeremy Hicks, *First Films of the Holocaust: Soviet Cinema and the Genocide of the Jews, 1938-1946* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012); for literature, see Harriet Murav, *Music from a Speeding Train: Jewish Literature in Post-Revolution Russia* (Stanford University Press, 2011).

⁷ Berkhoff, “The Holocaust in the Soviet Media,” in *The Holocaust in the East*, p. 100. See also Berkhoff, *Motherland in Danger*, p. 149.

⁸ Asher, “The Soviet Union, the Holocaust, and Auschwitz,” in *The Holocaust in the East*, p. 48. See also Gitelman, *Bitter Legacy*, p. 26.

there seems to be at least one instance in which non-Soviet interests helped inform a Soviet practice, and that is the Soviet liberation of the Nazi death and concentration camp at Majdanek. Such a focus shows how the domestic situation in early liberated Poland was shaped by Soviet foreign policy, but it also shows in turn how various Polish actors helped shape that policy in the context of the formation of their own foreign policy goals.

It is the goal of this thesis to show how the Polish-Soviet Extraordinary Commission to Investigate German crimes at Majdanek reflected broader developments in early Polish-Soviet relations, specifically addressing the issue of how early narratives of both victimhood and the general nature of the camp were formed and the place of the unique Jewish fate at Majdanek within that framework. I show how two reluctant communists occupying leading positions in the PKWN (Polish Committee for National Liberation), yet representing oppositional figures in Poland more generally (an ethnic Pole and a Jew), felt compelled to negotiate the interests of “their own” with the Soviet arbiter. Jewish suffering was ultimately downplayed, as Karel Berkhoff, David Shneer, and Jeremy Hicks have discussed in their own studies on Soviet representations of the Holocaust. My thesis departs from their studies in that I link the downplaying of Jewish suffering to competing Polish perspectives on Majdanek in the context of greater wartime developments. In my discussion I focus on the investigational procedure and debates for how the camp should be reported in the press rather than the press reports themselves, although I occasionally engage with them.

If the general Soviet policy after 1943 was to increasingly recognize Jewish suffering as such when it concerned non-Soviet Jews, why then would the Soviet press fail to emphasize Jewish victims in the case of Majdanek? On the one hand, eastern Poland was under communist influence, but on the other it was not a fully annexed Soviet territory. Therefore, it can be expected that Soviet reporting on Majdanek might fall somewhere in the middle. More importantly, though, the Poles

did not welcome the Soviets' liberation and subsequent occupation of the Lublin region, as this simultaneously ushered in the official establishment of communist and Soviet rule in Poland. The Soviets needed Polish support, but most Poles remained loyal to the Polish government-in-exile in London. Yet, a much lower but still significant number of Poles did welcome communist rule – but a *Polish* version and not simply a Soviet transplant. When I speak of Polish national interests, I mean to include both of these groups. I argue that the necessity of negotiating competing Polish national interests in the context of establishing communist rule meant that the Soviets departed from their own norms for representing both the Holocaust and wartime victimization. The norm would have firstly been to present Majdanek as a broader wartime atrocity in which not just Jewish but also Slavic victimization was incorporated into the greater suffering of all nationalities. But as Majdanek was outside the Soviet Union, Jews should have theoretically received more recognition. Jews were not completely erased, and the narrative of universal suffering was still highly visible, but, ultimately, Majdanek was presented primarily as a greater Polish tragedy, while other suffering (including that of Russian POWs) was downplayed.

My thesis is based primarily on an examination of the proceedings of the “Polish-Soviet Extraordinary Commission to Examine the Crimes at Majdanek.” I have closely examined several *protokoly*, prisoner/SS officer questionings, observational reports, and the official Communiqué written by the Commission. It is not a coincidence that Andrzej Witos, as Vice-Chairman of the PKWN, was also Chairman of the Commission. He was a member of the Peasant Party and head of the PKWN Department of Agriculture. He supported gradual land reform and was not considered radical by most ordinary Polish citizens, and since the Soviets and Polish communists were struggling to gain broader nationalist support, they gave him relative “free hand” because they thought he could most easily attract Poland’s largely peasant base and most effectively enact

policy.⁹ If the Red Army soldiers needed Witos's help securing Soviet order in Lublin and thus an overall smooth transition to communism, the Soviet members of the Commission at Majdanek would not likely have contested his judgment on the content of the Communique and other related documents – none of which reached final versions without his approval as Chairman. Even though Majdanek's Jews were outside the Soviet Union and therefore more likely to have been identified as Jews in the Soviet press, Witos – as a non-Jewish Polish national trying to create broad national support for communist rule – knew that emphasizing Jewish victimhood would likely antagonize the remaining Polish population. Therefore, the Communique and Soviet press reports gave more special attention to the general suffering of the Polish population and Soviet POWs at Majdanek, both of whom made up a large percentage of Majdanek's population.

In addition, I review other Red Army documents on Majdanek that were not related to the Commission, as well as a variety of documents specifically concerning the establishment of communist rule in Poland in the summer and fall of 1944, particularly in the Lublin region. I rely on these documents and extensive secondary reading to allow me to formulate conclusions for why timing (i.e., the critical window of flux during which the Soviets were trying to secure communist rule in Poland while still fighting the war) and the specific role of Poles under the Emil Sommerstein's and Andrzej Witos's leadership in the Commission were the two variables in this case.

The most important discussion is centered on my deep reading and comparison of the Communique (a summary of the Commission's findings) published in *Pravda* with what was actually documented in the Commission reports in the previous weeks, including a recorded debate in which the question of how to address national specificity and Jewish victimhood was explicitly

⁹ John Coutouvidis and Jaime Reynolds, *Poland, 1939-1947*, The Politics of Liberation Series, (Leicester University Press, 1986), pp. 142, 154.

addressed. To show the process by which Jewish suffering was erased during this fluid early post-war situation, I analyze the debates among Commission members – particularly between Dr. Emil Sommerstein and Professor N. I. Grashchenkov – which were recorded by Piotr Sobolewski as “Preniia” in the final protocols at the conclusion of the Commission’s investigation. More so than the other press reports, a deep focus on the Communique allows one to decipher which information transferred from the documents to the press and why the individuals writing it changed what they did.

It is possible to observe a three-step process of investigation, deliberation, and representation – all by the same people. Berkhoff writes that as of yet no document has been found that illustrates explicit top down directives on Soviet media portrayal of the Jews and that it is unlikely that such a document ever existed.¹⁰ While I have documents that explicitly show the process for how the Soviet and Polish members of the Commission reached a decision on how to address ethnic specificity in the press, I do not have any document from a higher Polish or Soviet authority approving or disapproving such representation. But in light of the comment from Berkhoff mentioned above, it might be assumed that decisions on how to deal with Jewish particularity were often individual deliberations arising from the situation at hand and that there existed no central directive in Moscow for reporting on Majdanek. The “Preniia” serve as an example of how a fluid situation effected the erasure of Jewish suffering in the context of establishing communist rule in Catholic Poland, securing communist moral and political authority in the post-war world order, and upholding Soviet internationalist values.

This thesis contributes to both studies of the Holocaust and Soviet history in general. Its contribution to Holocaust history was discussed at the beginning of this introduction. That is, a

¹⁰ Berkhoff, *Motherland in Danger*, p. 116.

major part of it occurred on Soviet or Soviet-occupied territory. But in terms of its relation to Soviet history, incorporating the Holocaust into Soviet studies can help historians better understand developments in the early Soviet west, or the territories annexed into the Soviet Union during and after WWII. Historian Tarik Cyril Amar recently produced a study on the Holocaust in western Ukraine, specifically Lviv, within the broader context of exploring the Soviet legacy in its western areas. He, too, departed from traditionally ‘Soviet lenses’ and addressed his project from a perspective of Ukrainian nationalism. He wrote that his project of analyzing Soviet Holocaust discourse in Lviv and western Ukraine could be compared with the “cases of Soviet satellite states,” in order to “shed new if indirect light on other regions of the Soviet west,” suggesting that more attention in Soviet studies should be paid to the national interests of those for whom Soviet liberation also meant the establishment of communist rule.¹¹ He described his own study as a “fresh exploration of the Soviet legacy,” and my thesis can also be viewed in such a light.

Historian Michael David-Fox asserts that World War II has largely been “marginalized in the advanced study of Soviet history” for decades by members of both the ‘totalitarian school’ who focused on ideology and the ‘revisionist social historians’ who shifted the direction to social change from below.¹² He calls for further research in which “Soviet history and the history of the Holocaust can be advanced simultaneously.”¹³ This is what I am attempting to do in writing my thesis. Within a framework of the ‘internationalization of Soviet history,’ I seek to understand aspects of both the Holocaust and its aftermath in the borderlands, as well as Soviet activity in these same areas. In this aim, a specific focus on the Soviet liberation of Majdanek in the context

¹¹ Tarik Cyril Amar, “A Disturbed Silence: Discourse on the Holocaust in the Soviet West as an Anti-Site of Memory,” in *The Holocaust in the East*, p. 159.

¹² Michael David-Fox, “Preface: The Holocaust as a Part of Soviet History,” in *The Holocaust in the East*, pp. vii-viii.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. xii.

of establishing communism in the summer and fall of 1944 will thus contribute to Holocaust, Soviet, and East European history.

CHAPTER ONE: POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS IN LUBLIN DURING THE FIRST DAYS OF LIBERATION

The Polish Committee on National Liberation (Polski Komitet Wyzwolenia Narodowego, or, PKWN) issued a manifesto establishing itself as the new governing power in Poland on July 22, 1944. This institutional body was favored first by the Soviets over the Polish government-in-exile in London (Rząd Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej na uchodźstwie) under Prime Minister Stanisław Mikołajczyk as the legitimate post-liberation government in Poland. However, by the fall of 1944 it had obtained the support of the rest of the Allies, as well. Mikołajczyk's government was the official successor to the new Polish independent state (officially called the Second Polish Republic) that had emerged in the aftermath of WWI. The PKWN was favored by the Soviets because it was staffed with Poland's pro-communist supporters, including members of the Polish Workers' Party (PWP). The PWP (PPR in Polish) was formed in 1942 and was the successor to the Communist Party of Poland (KPP in Polish), which had ceased to exist by 1938. Therefore, the Soviets had a strong interest in the smooth transition of power to the PKWN, as this would officially usher in the establishment of communist rule in Poland and would allow the country to serve as a communist buffer between the Soviet Union and Western Europe. However, as will be shown, Stalin understood that this would not be easy. Even though the PKWN – especially the PWP – closely aligned itself with the Soviets, Stalin exhibited uncertainty in how to deal with the new system in Lublin and was careful to avoid indicating any desire for communism in Poland to be a transplant of the Soviet version. He understood the sensitivity of competing visions for Poland's future among Poland's citizens and parties and was well aware of the fact that most Polish citizens supported the London government-in-exile. Ultimately, July to October 1944 was a time of flux for both the Soviets and the Poles, and this is reflected in the policy decisions of the time. Stalin

knew he would need to give Poles leeway in determining their own affairs but was still determined to see a smooth transition to communist rule in newly liberated Poland. This much is true for the years 1945 and 1946, as well – but the summer and early fall of 1944 was a time where this political vision was confronted with ambivalence by both the Soviets and Poles.

In July 1944 Chełm was the first city to be liberated west of the Curzon line, which had been established as the border between Poland and Bolshevik Russia after WWI. The border would be shifted west in 1945, but at this time Chełm was the first town in Poland ‘proper,’ even though there were ethnically Polish cities to the east of it. Therefore, the PKWN established their manifesto declaring communist rule here on July 24th. The Red Army entered the Lublin region that same day and had fully established control in the city by July 24th.¹⁴ On the very same day the PKWN was posting its manifesto and the Soviets were pushing further into the Lublin region, the Nazi officers in control of the Majdanek concentration and death camp were preparing the final transports of remaining prisoners for deportation to Auschwitz in anticipation of the Red Army’s arrival.

In most of the literature addressing the Soviets’ penetration into the Lublin region – the first major step in claiming German-occupied territory – Majdanek is not centrally addressed.¹⁵ It seems that the liberation of the camp was of secondary importance to broader wartime developments in Poland around the same time that citizens did not consider synonymous with liberation. Poles did not perceive the Soviets as liberators, generally speaking. Instead of “liberation” the term “likwidacja,” or liquidation, was used to describe Soviet activity at Majdanek

¹⁴ For a detailed study of the establishment of communist rule in Poland see Krystyna Kersten, *The Establishment of Communist Rule in Poland, 1943-1948* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

¹⁵ For example, Kersten, *The Establishment of Communist Rule in Poland*; Halik Kochanski, *The Eagle Unbowed: Poland and the Poles in the Second World War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012); Coutouvidis and Reynolds, *Poland*; Neither is it discussed in the documents collected in these two sources: Antony Polonsky, ed., *The Great Powers and the Polish Question, 1941-45: A Documentary Study in Cold War Origins* (The London School of Economics and Political Science, 1976) and idem. and Bolesław Druker, eds., *The Beginnings of Communist Rule in Poland* (London: Routledge, 1980).

because after liberating the camp Red Army officers converted one of the fields into an NKVD camp to intern prisoners of the Polish Home Army (AK, or Armia Krajowa) who had been accused of sabotaging the war effort.¹⁶ This is one of the early reasons for why Poles failed to see the Soviets as liberators. “Liquidation” refers to the internment or shooting of such soldiers but the term also became applied to Soviet actions more broadly which were defined by Poles as hostile.¹⁷ A Jewish survivor of the Holocaust recalled how when he returned to Lublin in 1946 “the marble monument that was erected to the memory of the liberators of the city [of Lublin] was violated daily.”¹⁸ The liberation of Majdanek also occurred simultaneously with the ill-favored establishment of communism in Poland. Most studies of the summer and fall of 1944 in Poland focus on this aspect. But it would be highly problematic to assume that there was no support among Poles at all for the Soviet occupants and communism, in general. Marci Shore’s work of intellectual and cultural history shows the vibrancy of Marxism in Poland among intellectuals, but scholars have also pointed out that there were left-leaning trends in more traditional sectors, such as in the Peasant Party.¹⁹ But those who were avid supporters of communism and the PWP wanted a Polish version. For example, Roman Werfel – the leading Polish communist ideologue – in drawing on a metaphor from French relations with the Pope in Rome said in an interview from June-November 1982:

“[There were those] who thought that the basic principles of the faith should be decided by the Pope in Rome, but that decisions specific to France were better left

¹⁶ Państwowe Muzeum na Majdanku, ed., *Państwowe Muzeum na Majdanku w latach 1944-1947: Wybór dokumentów* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo, 2004), p. 5, pp. 55-56.

¹⁷ For more on this see Ryszard Terlecki, ch. 2, “Pobój: Narzędzia zbrodni” in *Miecz i Tarcza Komunisty: Historia aparatu bezpieczeństwa w Polsce 1944-1990* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2007), pp. 41-75.

¹⁸ David Zabludovsky, “Horrors, Death and Destruction (Experiences of a Holocaust Survivor)” (Hebrew), trans. Ziva Rosenhand, www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/zabludow/zab143.html#Page149 (accessed April 4, 2015). Here “violated” probably means destroyed or defiled. This testimony is also presented in Jan Marek Chodakiewicz, *After the Holocaust: Polish-Jewish Conflict in the Wake of WWII* (Boulder, CO: East European Monographs, 2003), p. 70.

¹⁹ Kersten, *The Establishment of Communist Rule in Poland*, pp. 47, 50. See also Marci Shore, *Caviar and Ashes: A Warsaw Generation's Life and Death in Marxism, 1918-1968* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

to the French themselves. I transposed their thinking onto Polish-Soviet relations.

We in Poland knew better what was needed.”²⁰

Werfel spent most of the war period in Central Asia and Moscow shortly after becoming a member of the VKP(b) (All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks), but when he returned to Poland it was to Lublin in July 1944. Both in Russia and in Poland he served as the editor of several Polish communist newspapers. When the interviewer asked him to give a specific example of a Polish national consideration for implementing communism, he said that collectivization was the first thing that came to mind, rather than circumspection about Jews. Werfel was of Jewish origin himself, but he understood that communism would go sour in Poland if non-Polish citizens perceived it as a primarily Jewish system. He said that this was why communists spent considerable energy keeping Jews out of the internal trade structures in Poland, but in the same interview he indicated that the Soviets should have applied the same policy to the security apparatus – “Johnny has to be beaten by Johnny, and not by Moshe,” he said.²¹ Of course, this was an observation he made in retrospect and in reference to Jewish presence in interrogation rooms. But it is known that post-war Jewish-Polish relations were tense, especially in the eastern territories. There was the strong perception among Poles that a depolonization of the ‘kresy’, or borderland areas making up the Soviet west and Polish east, was taking place in the summer to fall of 1944, coinciding with their “harassment” by the communists. Jews were not perceived as also being harassed.²²

In regard to Polish perceptions of early post-war Soviet rule and Jewish participation in it, Daniel Blatman asserts that even if Poles “acknowledged the Red Army as the agent that had ended the occupation” in the first weeks after liberation, it did not take long for the Polish population to

²⁰ Interview of Roman Werfel in Teresa Torańska, *‘Oni’: Stalin’s Polish Puppets* (London: Collins and Harvill, 1987), p. 118.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

²² Chodakiewicz, *After the Holocaust*, p. 120 – This book provides a unique and insightful perspective, but one should read it cautiously. Alexander V. Prusin, *The Lands Between The Lands Between: Conflict in the East European Borderlands, 1870-1992 (Zones of Violence)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 220.

“quickly change its mind about the foreign forces that were now garrisoned on Polish soil.”²³ This was because they began to perceive that Jews were overwhelmingly in control in the Lublin area, although in actuality Poles and Ukrainians were much more politically active and institutionally involved in the new regime than Jews were. However, the *perception* that Jews were in control remained popular. This was a continuation of the legacy of the derogatory notion of Żydokomuna (Jewish Communism) from the Bolshevik Revolution and especially the Polish-Soviet War in 1920. Blatman asserted that the PKWN itself “had no clear policy toward the Jewish population in post-liberation Poland.”²⁴ But it seems that a great many Polish citizens themselves did – and not a positive one.²⁵ Any study of early post-war Poland must necessarily consider the Jewish issue as a Polish national consideration. In Poland there had already been a long tradition of defining national identity in terms of the exclusion of the ethnic and religious Jewish ‘other’. The war exacerbated Polish-Jewish tensions and further alienated the Jewish population. A government perceived as overwhelmingly Jewish would automatically render opposition and skepticism, regardless of policy.

Before moving forward, it is necessary to backtrack a bit to the question of collectivization. It is already known that the Soviets changed their policy on collectivization in Belarus and eastern Poland in 1939. For a while they deliberately avoided collectivization and instead divided up large estates and distributed the land to peasants. Martin Myant says that this was for a larger Soviet political goal of gaining widespread support among those whose territory they had recently occupied.²⁶ Land reform seems to be a recurring variable in the Soviets’ approach towards peoples

²³ Daniel Blatman, “The Encounter between Jews and Poles in Lublin District after Liberation, 1944-1945,” *East European Politics and Societies* 20, no. 4 (November 2006): p. 613.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 612.

²⁵ See, for example, Prusin, *The Lands Between*, Joshua D. Zimmerman, ed., *Contested Memories: Poles and Jews during the Holocaust and Its Aftermath* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003) and Norman Davies and Antony Polonsky, eds., *Jews in Eastern Poland and the USSR, 1939-46* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1991).

²⁶ Martin Myant, *Poland: A Crisis for Socialism* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1982), p. 11.

in the kresy. This was the case at the onset of the war, and it was also a key issue for Poles in the summer of 1944 – perhaps even more pressing. The historian Alexander Prusin defined land reform as “the focal point of the struggle for power between the Soviet government and its opponents.”²⁷

If the Soviets were willing to modify their policy towards collectivization in order to assuage dissent in 1939, it seems plausible that they would then alter other policies for the same purposes near the war’s end. It was in some ways a very similar situation. In September 1939 (shortly after the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was signed) the Soviets modified their policy of collectivization so as to win the support of the non-Polish minorities in eastern Poland, while in 1944 they modified their approach to reporting wartime atrocity in effort to gain the support of the Polish majority. However, the basic set up was the same. That is, the territory in question was under occupation from two sides by opposing governments. Whereas minorities may have seen one regime as the lesser of two evils, the Soviets would have to work harder to appease the Polish ethnic majority who viewed the Soviet and Nazi occupations as equally evil. In both cases, the Soviet government needed to appeal to those whose interests might belie a smooth transition to localized Soviet control. In 1939 the Soviets regarded the national minorities (Ukrainians and Belarussians) of eastern Poland as most significant, while by 1944 the focus had fully switched to the same region’s national ethnically Polish majority.

In considering the history of nationalism and socialism in Poland during the summer of liberation, Myant gives a concise statement on the Soviet approach to establishing communism in Poland: “Stalin’s aim was to ensure that he had a totally reliable regime in Poland, but it ideally should be a stable regime broadly acceptable to the Polish people.”²⁸ This sentiment is indicated

²⁷ Prusin, *The Lands Between*, p. 223.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

in a report from August 18-19, 1944, by Prime Minister Mikołajczyk to the Delegate of the (London) Government in Poland. He was writing to convey messages from his previous correspondence with Stalin and to confirm that he would be traveling to Warsaw to meet with members of the PWP so that they might work together to reorganize the Polish government with participation of members from both the PWP and the London government-in-exile. In this dispatch Mikołajczyk stated that “such a solution would at once create a wide basis in Poland for a Polish-Soviet co-operation.”²⁹ After hearing Mikołajczyk’s proposition, Stalin expressed approval of it in the hopes that an agreement between the two sides could somehow still result. In Mikołajczyk’s dispatch to the delegate in Warsaw, he described how in his meeting with Stalin the Marshal had “expressed a hope that the Poles would eventually come to an agreement between themselves.”³⁰ He concluded his report by conjecturing that the Soviet Government had “not yet finally sided with the communists [even if the PWP was trying to side with it], still leaving a margin for compromise” and that for the time being it has “given a free hand to communists” while still in flux about “whether Poland should be Sovietized.”³¹

In a meeting between Mikołajczyk and Stalin a couple weeks earlier, much of the same sentiments were reflected in their conversation. Mikołajczyk implored Stalin to “take the interests of Poland into consideration” to which Stalin replied:

²⁹ “Dispatch from M. Mikołajczyk to the Delegate of the Government in Poland with an account of his visit to Moscow,” London, August 18-19, 1944, trans. from Polish in The Sikorski Institute, ed., *Documents on Polish-Soviet Relations 1943-1945*, vol. 2 of *Documents on Polish-Soviet Relations 1939-1945* (London: Heinemann, 1967), p. 350.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

“In my opinion, the Polish nation must not follow the lead of the Soviet Union, but walk side by side with it. Poland has to take her own course, but it can be parallel to that pursued by the Soviet Union.”³²

Of course, such statements coming from Stalin should be taken with a grain of salt, but there is no reason to believe that it is completely insincere. In this conversation which took place in early August, Stalin expressed hope that Mikołajczyk would eventually come closer to reaching some kind of understanding with the PKWN on the question of leadership in newly liberated Poland. But in another conversation Mikołajczyk tried to convince Stalin to sympathize more acutely with the London Government by telling him that there were not even any “serious socialists within the Committee of National Liberation.”³³ He then mentioned Andrzej Witos (who was a chair member of the PKWN and head of the Agricultural Department) as an example, claiming that Witos was not really representative of the Peasant Party. Stalin simply replied that due to wartime considerations “new men have become important in Poland and it would be impossible to call upon old authorities only.”³⁴ Marci Shore writes that even at the Union of Polish Patriots in Moscow in 1943, Poles who had “never even been communist sympathizers” were summoned to Moscow.³⁵ So it is possible that Stalin was already aware of Witos’s reluctance to completely embrace communism.

Of course, Stalin was not assuring Mikołajczyk that Poland’s national interests would be met for their own sake. The conversations above took place in early August, but on the very day

³² “Note on the conversation between M. Mikołajczyk and Marshal Stalin relating to the renewed attempts at an understanding between M. Mikołajczyk and the Polish Committee of National Liberation and to assistance for fighting Warsaw,” Moscow, August 9, 1944, trans. from Polish in Sikorski Institute, *Documents*, p. 338.

³³ “Note on a conversation between M. Mikołajczyk and Marshal Stalin on the future frontiers of Poland and agreement between the Polish Government and the Polish Committee of National Liberation,” Moscow, August 3, 1944, trans. from Polish in *ibid.*, p. 312.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 313.

³⁵ Shore, *Caviar and Ashes*, p. 239.

the Soviets entered Lublin and took control of it on July 23 Stalin sent a letter to Churchill confirming that he would not recognize the London Government as legitimate and would instead favor “a Provisional Polish Government made up of democratic forces” which those in London might hope to later join.³⁶ The ‘democratic forces’ were, of course, those which had expressly aligned themselves with the Soviet authorities within the institutional body of the PKWN (made up largely of PWP sympathizers or full-fledged members). But the fact that the Soviets were liberating Poland did not imply “an easy road to power” for the PWP and the PKWN by proxy.³⁷ Stalin recognized this, so he would not have gotten rid of someone like Witos for lack of communist vigor. In fact, he likely would have wanted to keep the PKWN staffed with a few people like Witos for precisely such a reason. Mikołajczyk was trying to discredit the PKWN by highlighting Witos’s reluctance, but for Stalin this was a non-issue. There was no question that the PKWN would serve as the legitimizing institution and structural governing body in Lublin and, therefore, for Poland, in general (although Warsaw and the west were still under Nazi occupation).

Furthermore, although the PKWN was mostly supported by the PWP, there were still three other parties in addition to the PWP constituting this “alliance of the left.”³⁸ But when Stalin assured Mikołajczyk that he would take Polish interests seriously he understood the necessity of balancing the varying interests of the left. However, it is worth repeating that the large majority of Poles still supported Mikołajczyk’s government in London, even after liberation of the eastern territories. They were primarily peasants for whom issues of land reform were most pressing but

³⁶ Letter from Marshal Stalin to Mr. Churchill, “Stalin Correspondence, I, no. 301,” Moscow, July 23, 1944, in Antony Polonsky, ed., *The Great Powers and the Polish Question 1941-45: A Documentary Study in Cold War Origins* (London: London School of Economics, 1976), p. 208.

³⁷ Myant, *Poland*, p. 17.

³⁸ For an analyses of the development of Polish political parties from 1944-1980 see Jerzy J. Wiatr, “The Party System, Involvement in Politics, and Political Leadership,” in Lawrence S. Graham and Maria K. Ciechocinska, eds., *The Polish Dilemma: Views from Within* (Boulder and London: Westview Press, 1987).

also for whom Polish culture was equated with *Catholic* culture.³⁹ Stalin would need to balance the interests of an incohesive left with the interests of the rest of the traditionally-minded nation who saw communism as a foreign imposition. The Catholic Church had a long tradition of strength in Poland and was inherently tied to Polish nationalism. The war had strengthened this connection, and the bond between people and church was more intricate in Poland than in any other Central or East European territories with a Catholic tradition that came under Soviet control during and after the war. Political scientist Pedro Ramet wrote that “only in Poland... did the communist regime hesitate.”⁴⁰ Ramet also pointed out that it was only in Poland that anti-communist armed resistance continued for two or three years after the war’s end.

Even if Stalin’s promise to consider Polish national interests was somewhat cynical, it was not insincere. Looking after Poland’s interests meant delegitimizing the London Government while simultaneously not alienating those who supported it. He also needed at the same time to create security for the PKWN and compel the nation it to cede its eastern territories, as during this time Churchill and Stalin renewed discussions on shifting the Curzon line. These were the issues on the table, but Poles would control implementation of Soviet-generated policy at the local level, at least during this period of flux from July to October.⁴¹ While the Soviets considered the establishment of the PKWN and the cession of its eastern territories uncontested, questions of

³⁹ For an analysis of war time agricultural devastation and the immediacy of handling agricultural issues in post-war Poland, see the above source and also Ryszard Manteuffel-Szoego, “Agriculture in Modern Poland” in *The Polish Dilemma*. For issues related to the importance of religion to post-war Poles, see Władysław Piwowarski, “Polish Catholicism as an Expression of National Identity” in *ibid.* For an analyses of the same theme in specific relation to the Holocaust, see Iwona Irwin-Zarecka, *Neutralizing Memory: The Jew in Contemporary Poland* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1989).

⁴⁰ Pedro Ramet, “The Interplay of Religious Policy and Nationalities Policy in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe,” in *idem.*, ed., *Religion and Nationalism in Soviet and East European Politics* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1984), p. 21.

⁴¹ “Tass communique stating that the Memorandum of the Polish Government of 29 August was transmitted to the Polish Committee of National Liberation,” Moscow, September 6, 1944, trans. from Russian, in Sikorski Institute, *Documents*, p. 387 and “Conversation between M. Mikołajczyk, M. Romer, Count Raczyński, Mr. Churchill, Sir Owen O’Malley relating to little hope that Warsaw would hold out until the rescue by Soviet troops and there were difficulties in resuming Mikołajczyk’s conversations with Marshal Stalin,” London, September 29, 1944, trans. from Polish, in *ibid.*, pp. 395-397, and “Letter from M. Romer to the British Government about the seizure of the eastern provinces of Poland and the imposition of the authority of the Committee of National Liberation on the remaining territory of Poland,” London, October 7, 1944, in *ibid.*, pp. 400-404.

religion and land reform were apparently negotiable. The place of religion in Polish national identity would ultimately prove the more important factor for how members of the Polish-Soviet Commission addressed Jewish specificity at Majdanek.

As mentioned in the introduction, Andrzej Witos supported gradual land reform and was not considered radical by Poles. Therefore, the Soviet authorities gave him a relatively “free hand” in policy.⁴² Apparently, he had only become a Polish communist activist after being retrieved from a Soviet labor camp in Siberia and had, indeed, been exhibiting this free hand by opposing proposed agricultural reforms among more pro-Soviet members in the late summer of 1944.⁴³ Dr. Emil Sommerstein shared a similar fate. He, too, had been arrested by the NKVD and sent to the Gulag before being released in 1941 and recruited into the (Soviet) Union of Polish Patriots. He, like Witos, was also present at its first Congress in Moscow in 1943 and represented another member of the Polish Union who had previously not sympathized with communism.⁴⁴ It seems there were more than a few. Sommerstein – a prominent leader of Polish Jewry and outspoken advocate of Zionism – was also sent to Lublin in July 1944 to serve as a member of the PKWN and on August 18 became a member of the committee for Polish Jews in the USSR which was organized under the auspices of the Union of Polish Patriots.

How is it that two seemingly opposing figures, in relation to the Polish/Jewish question in a Polish national context, would both end up serving together on the PKWN? It reflects the fact that – although certainly left and largely pro-Soviet – the PKWN was not a uniform ‘left.’ Jaff Schatz writes that during the summer of 1944 the Soviets were willing to recruit into the new

⁴² Coutouvidis and Reynolds, *Poland*, pp. 142, 154.

⁴³ Shore, *Cavir and Ashes*, p. 252.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 239.

Soviet-backed Polish army members with only very loose ties to the left, including Zionists, with the assumption that “after a short period of basic instruction [they could] be promoted into the political apparatus.”⁴⁵ From an internal Soviet viewpoint, neither Witos nor Sommerstein seemed like the typical people the Soviets would have wanted representing a government which they sought to legitimize, with Witos being a less than enthusiastic Polish communist and Sommerstein being not only a Jew but a Zionist one at that. The PKWN was a project to legitimize the provisional government in the eyes of primarily, the *Polish* people, but also for international eyes. There were not that many Polish communists at the time, so the Soviets likely would have made concessions for someone like Sommerstein. He previously had no communist leanings and had sympathized with a form of Zionism that favored creating a new homeland based on capitalist economics. Jakub Berman, the most prominent communist in the PKWN, and Yitzhak Zuckerman, a leading figure in the Jewish Fighting Organization and instrumental in leading the Warsaw Uprising, had expressed amazement that Sommerstein “as a rightist Zionist” had joined a pro-communist government.⁴⁶ When Zuckerman asked him how this had happened, Sommerstein said that one of his interrogators had come to him with two options – “to stay in jail or to be a minister.”⁴⁷ After hearing his reply the interrogators “took him out of jail, dressed him, [and] brought him to Moscow.”⁴⁸ Zuckerman wrote that Sommerstein understood that this was because “they [the Soviets] needed him so they could appear to the outside world with a government that included a Zionist representative, since they had to consider the United States and world Jewish opinion.”⁴⁹ And thus a Zionist became a representative of a Polish (albeit a Soviet-backed) body.

⁴⁵ Jaff Schatz, *The Generation: The Rise and Fall of the Jewish Communists of Poland* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), p. 183.

⁴⁶ Yitzhak Zuckerman, *A Surplus of Memory: Chronicle of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), p. 568.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 569.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

It is likely the Soviets had even more misgivings about people like Witos but ultimately decided to perceive his 'flaws' (i.e., nationalist leanings, long-standing indifference to communism) not as detrimental to the communist project but rather as useful in the Polish context. This speaks to the flux of the early post-war situation during the months of July to October 1944 – both in terms of divisive currents with Polish society at that time and the Soviets' need to negotiate them in order to fulfill their own interests in seeing a successful implementation of communism and obtaining the eastern territories (with the approval of the western Allies).

Witos and Sommerstein occupied instrumental rather than ideologically sanctioned positions in the PKWN. They likely became members of the Extraordinary Commission at Majdanek because their primary positions of authority as leaders in the PKWN made it only natural that they would occupy key positions on the Commission. Although both operated under the general task of furthering Polish communism, each of them was uniquely suited to negotiating the interests of 'their own' – Jews and ethnic Poles. Their role on the Majdanek Commission was one way for them to exercise their particular briefs, briefs which provide a lens through which we can see how still ambiguous questions of Jewish-Polish-Soviet relations were being worked out in the period of flux in the summer to early fall of 1944.

CHAPTER TWO: THE POLISH-SOVIET EXTRAORDINARY COMMISSION TO INVESTIGATE GERMAN CRIMES IN THE AREA OF LUBLIN AT MAJDANEK

On August 17, 1944, a statement issued by Polpress (the publishing agency set up by the Polish Committee for National Liberation, or PKWN) appeared in the PKWN's official newspaper *Rzeczpospolita* announcing the creation of the Polish-Soviet Extraordinary Commission at Majdanek for investigating the crimes the Germans had committed in Lublin. Investigations had been going on since the Red Army first entered Majdanek in late July, and the Commission used several of those reports in their own investigation, which likely began around the end of the first week of August. Reportage independent of the Commission had already appeared in the Soviet press as early as August 10. But the Commission is considered separately in this thesis because it represented a conscious decision by Poles and Soviets to collaborate while investigating Majdanek and allows for a more direct conception of the development of early post-war Polish-Soviet relations. The Commission mirrored developments that were happening in the Lublin area more broadly. That is, it reflected an institutionally domestic creation to serve Polish interests but was under Soviet influence and its de facto authority.

The Polpress statement of August 17 mentioned that on the outskirts of Lublin in the camp at Majdanek the Germans had carried out mass murders of Soviet prisoners-of-war and of imprisoned Poles, Frenchmen, Czechs, Jews, Belgians, Austrians, Serbs, Greeks, and those of many other nationalities. The report stated that in special consideration of the fact that the Germans carried out mass murders of Soviet POWs, the PKWN appealed to the Soviet authorities and requested permission to create an extraordinary commission to investigate the crimes at Majdanek, to which the Soviets agreed.⁵⁰ As a site of wartime atrocity committed by the Germans, Majdanek

⁵⁰ "Polsko-Sowiecka Komisja na Majdanku," "komunikat 'Polpressu,'" *Rzeczpospolita*, August 17, 1944.

remained under control of the Red Army. As all military sites in Poland were under strict control of the Red Army, the Poles would have had to cede authority to the Soviets on all matters relating to the camp.⁵¹ Poles – even members of the Soviet favored PKWN – would have had to obtain permission before setting up any sort of official commission at Majdanek. Thus the PKWN members may have considered that by pointing out the prominence of Soviet POWs at Majdanek, they could appeal to Soviet sensitivities and would likely receive permission to set up a commission more easily.

It is apparent that this was a Polish-initiated commission, several of whom were either members of the PKWN or prominent Polish figures in Lublin. Of the ten members of the commission, only three were Soviet. Yet, it appears that Professor N. I. Grashchenkov, a Soviet member, exercised a large degree of weight in the process.

<i>Members of the Commission</i>
Andrzej Witos – Chairman (Vice-Chairman of the PKWN)
Professor D. I. Kudriavtsev – Vice-Chairman (USSR)
Dr. Emil Sommerstein (member of the PKWN)
Professor N. I. Grashchenkov (USSR)
Professor V. I. Prozorovskii (USSR)
Reverend Dr. Kruszyński (Dean of the Lublin Catholic Cathedral)
Dr. Ludwik Christians (Chairman of the Lublin Red Cross Society)
Professor Leon Białkowski (of the Lublin Catholic University)
Professor Mieczysław Popławski (of the Lublin University)
Zuzia Balcerzak (Procurator of the Lublin Appeal Court)
Czesław Szczepański (President of the Lublin Circuit Court)
Piotr Sobolewski – Secretary (position seems purely administrative)

Figure 1

⁵¹ Article One, Article Two, and Article Seven of the “Agreement between the Polish Committee of National Liberation and the Soviet Government relating to the conditions on which the said Committee was to assume administration of the liberated territory of Poland,” Moscow, July 26, 1944, trans. from Polish, in The Sikorski Institute, *Documents*, pp. 652-653.

The following sections will illuminate what was learned about the nature of Majdanek and its victims during the commission's investigations and place this within the greater context of early Polish-Soviet relations in the late summer and fall of 1944 – especially concerning the Jewish issue.

“No one liberated me from Majdanek: the Germans retreated and I walked out after them.”⁵² These are the words Waldemar Lotnik used to describe his escape from the camp on July 20, 1944. Only a few guards remained at Majdanek and most of the prisoners had already been either killed or transported elsewhere.⁵³ Therefore, the Soviets encountered a camp largely empty of prisoners and German officers, but otherwise it was essentially in the same condition as it had been functioning for the last three years. In the early days after liberation those occupying the territory at Majdanek consisted mostly of Red Army soldiers and personnel from the 69th Army of the Belarussian Front. From August 2-3 a small commission of officers from this group began further investigating the camp. The Germans had set fire to the crematorium before evacuating, but only the wooden frames were destroyed, and the brick ovens remained intact. The Soviets began examining the crematorium and collecting other camp objects. Over the next couple of weeks various bodies, such as groups of Red Army officers of the Red Army and Polish medical commissions, continued to investigate the camp until the dual Polish and Soviet Commission was established in mid-August.

At 10:00 am on the morning of August 18, 1944, the Polish-Soviet Extraordinary Commission to Investigate German Atrocities at Majdanek in the Area of Lublin officially commenced. This was the first time that all members of the Commission assembled together for a

⁵² Waldemar Lotnik, *Nine Lives: Ethnic Conflict in the Polish-Ukrainian Borderlands* (London: Serif, 1999), p. 115.

⁵³ Zofia Leszczyńska, *Kronika Obozu na Majdanku* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Lubelskie, 1980), pp. 335-337.

general meeting. Chairman of the Commission Andrzej Witos opened with a solemn speech in which he alluded to the fact that the crimes at Majdanek were fundamentally different from other war crimes, even hinting that a critique of humanity's understanding of western 'civilization' might be necessary – "the gravity of the crimes is even more severe if we allow ourselves to consider the fact that the organizers and perpetrators were Germans who call themselves the most cultured, most civilized people."⁵⁴ He condemned Britain and America for not seriously perceiving the great danger fascist ideology posed for Poles and the Slavic peoples, in general, but praised the Soviet Union for recognizing that there did exist peoples in Europe who would destroy women and children "with the help of cultural means," referring to modern technologies and scientific ideologies of race.

One should not diminish the Soviet and Polish recognition that a hatred of Slavic peoples was inherent to Nazi ideology – after all, the German *Operation Ost* was specifically implemented to colonize east and central European territories, which would necessitate the killing of Slavs in general. Yet what Witos's speech and the Commission documents subsequently to be analyzed reveal is that despite evidence seemingly pointing to Jews as the primary victims of the Nazis' genocidal policy, neither the Soviets nor the Poles interpreted it as such. The difficult question is whether or not their refusal to recognize the inherent nature of antisemitism to Nazi ideology was an active choice to subvert Jewish victimhood or what one might call a 'legitimate misinterpretation' based on sincerity in the context of war in the east where, as Harvey Asher says, "the contrast between Jewish and non-Jewish deaths was less sharp."⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Opening speech of Andrzej Witos on the integration of miscellaneous commissions at Majdanek into the Commission for a collective investigation, recorded by Piotr Sobolewski, protokol no. 1 of the Polish-Soviet Extraordinary Commission at Majdanek, p. 1, Lublin, August 18, 1944, Archiwum Państwowego Muzeum na Majdanku (APMM) (Archive of the State Museum at Majdanek), zespół (fund) XXV (Polsko-Sowiecka Komisja Nadzwyczajna ds. Zbadania Zbrodni na Terenie b. Obozu Koncentracyjnego na Majdanku, 1944 [Polish-Soviet Extraordinary Commission to Examine Crimes in the Area of the Concentration Camp at Majdanek, 1944]), jednostka (j.a.) (unit) 4, listek (sheet) 10.

⁵⁵ Harvey Asher, "The Soviet Union, the Holocaust, and Auschwitz," in *The Holocaust in the East*, p. 49.

It appears that the answer contains aspects of both. After all, Red Army officials all throughout the war were informed of the specifically Jewish devastation of Nazi atrocities in relation to those of other peoples. For example, in one of several Red Army documents detailing Jewish suffering at the Treblinka death camp, an inhabitant of the Polish village Radoszyce revealed that “in Treblinka there were two camps. One Jewish, the other Polish. ...[T]hey brought the Jews into the camp only to exterminate them.”⁵⁶ It can be inferred that while Poles and Jews may have been in the same camp, Poles might be killed while Jews were *necessarily* killed.

At the same time – even in consideration of Ilya Ehrenburg’s wartime reports indicating Jewish devastation in Eastern Europe – the scale of it was not fully perceived even by Jews themselves in the immediate period following the first liberation. It also should be pointed out that Jewish victimhood in the Holocaust truly emerged in western memory culture only in the 1960s, and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe’s and Jean-Luc Nancy’s critical essay “The Nazi Myth” (which explicitly placed antisemitism and the necessity for annihilating the Jews as inherent to the Nazi variant of fascism) only appeared in 1990. Majdanek was initially built to detain Soviet POWs and the number of non-Jewish Poles who perished or were imprisoned there was large. Therefore, it should not come as completely surprising that the Soviets and Poles might largely downplay Jewish suffering at Majdanek.

Yet, to say that they did not notice that there was something particular about the Jewish ‘aspect’ would be incorrect. Majdanek can be seen as the platform from which the (still malleable) stance on Jewish issues in early post-war Soviet-Polish relations began to develop. The Commission gives one the chance to examine the development more clearly. In his speech at the

⁵⁶ Document 113, “Lager’ Treblinka,” “Pokazaniia zhitelia derevni Rados’ts’ Mecheslava Anyshkevicha,” in F. D. Sverdlov, *Dokumenty Obviniaiat: Kholokost: svidetel’sтва Krasnoi Armii* (Moscow: Rossiiskaia Biblioteka Kholokosta, 1996), p. 97 (originally from *TsAMO SSSR (Tsentral’nyi Arkhiv Ministerstva Oborony Soiuzu Sovetskikh Sotsialisticheskikh Respublik* [Central Archive of the Ministry of Defense of the Soviet Union]), *fond 65-i armii, opis 10510, delo 113, list 190*).

Commission's first general meeting, Witos first referred to "the extermination of Poles, Russian prisoners-of-war, Jews, and representatives of almost all the peoples of Europe" – but by noting that "greatest were the number of victims among the Polish people" and arguing for the need to "emphasize the danger of 'Germanism' for [first and foremost] Poland and its neighbors," Witos framed Majdanek as a primarily Polish site of atrocity, with Poles above not only Jews but even the Russian POWs in the hierarchy of suffering. As Witos and others pushed for Polish emphasis, the Soviet members did not prohibit them from doing so. This is likely because the Poles also gave what was probably more sincere than simple "lip-service" to Soviet propaganda norms about universal suffering and victory. Witos established from the beginning that they were examining a specifically Polish site. Yet, always residing just below the surface, arising here and there, was the thought that perhaps there was something more unique about the Jews. Although apparent to all, it was Dr. Emil Sommerstein who would try - and ultimately fail - to urge the other members to recognize the specifically Jewish nature of Majdanek and to report the atrocity as such in the press.

In his reports to a foreign press outlet, Sommerstein made several appeals to America, Britain, and Canada to recognize Jewish destruction. A correspondent of the Jewish Telegraphic Agency arrived in Lublin after the Commission was already underway. On August 30 the correspondent reported that "two-thirds of the...[victims]...of the notorious Majdanek 'extermination camp' near Lublin were Jews" and that Sommerstein had particularly emphasized this.⁵⁷ The report mentioned that Sommerstein had also emphasized the fact that "[i]t must be remembered that survival of Jews in Poland under the Nazis is in itself a miracle. The survival of 1,000 Jews in the area where Jews were massacred in the hundreds of thousands is an act

⁵⁷ "JTA Correspondent Reports 1,000,000 Jews Exterminated at Majdanek; Finds 1000 Survivors," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA)*, August 31, 1944 (August 30, 1944, Lublin), <http://www.jta.org/1944/08/31/archive/jta-correspondent-reports-1000000-jews-exterminated-at-majdanek-finds-1000-survivors> (accessed April 8, 2015).

surpassing human understanding.”⁵⁸ Although the total extent of Jewish devastation in Poland and Europe was not yet fully perceived during this time, Sommerstein was in a position to gauge that Jews, indeed, had been severely and uniquely impacted by the war. This was reflected in his prediction that “[t]he total number of Jews in Poland after all evacuees will return to their home towns will not exceed 250,000 as compared with the 3,500,000 that lived there before the war.” He was able to make such statements because since late July and early August the Jewish Committee in Lublin – of which he was the head – had been registering all liberated Jews in the eastern territories of Poland at the committee’s headquarters at number 8 Rybna Street so that they might be repatriated to their home towns and reconnected with surviving relatives. As head of the PKWN Department for War Reparations, Sommerstein was also working hard on repatriating Polish Jews who had fled to the Soviet Union before or early during the war. Even though there was apparently a strong sentiment for revenge among Jews in the liberated eastern territories, Sommerstein also knew that many Jews would desire to quickly emigrate from Poland so that “they could spend their remaining years away from the horrors which they have suffered,” despite the promises of tolerance and projections of a better life for Jews in a new communist Poland.⁵⁹ His work in Lublin in his daily interactions with surviving Jews exposed him to the devastation of Polish Jewry before the total extent of it was even fully known.

Negotiating simultaneously the Soviet/PKWN interests and the greater national interests of the Polish government in London, Sommerstein was in a precarious position. Furthermore, as responsible for representing the interests of Poland’s Jewish population in general, Sommerstein

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ “Jewish Relief Committee Organized in Liberated Poland: Hopes for Aid from America,” *JTA*, September 6, 1944 (Lublin, September 5), <http://www.jta.org/1944/09/06/archive/jewish-relief-committee-organized-in-liberated-poland-hopes-for-aid-from-america> (accessed April 8, 2015) and “Jewish Agency Negotiating for Emigration of Jews from Liberated Europe,” *JTA*, September 27, 1944 (September 26, London), <http://www.jta.org/1944/09/27/archive/jewish-agency-negotiating-for-emigration-of-jews-from-liberated-europe> (accessed April 8, 2015).

found himself in a difficult situation with regard to the Polish Jews in the London government who were eager to contact him but were refraining from doing so until a general agreement between the PKWN and London Government had been reached.⁶⁰ A report from the Polish Jews in London stated that they were “reluctant to make any independent moves” before hearing from Sommerstein on new developments in reaching an agreement between the two sides because ultimately they felt that “the policy of Polish Jews here [in London] must be subordinated to considerations of major Polish policy and must follow the line of the Polish Government.”⁶¹ Yet, as has been shown, the likelihood of the London Poles reaching an agreement with the PKWN was quite slim, as Stalin ultimately sought to secure PKWN interests while not antagonizing the rest of the population. Sommerstein was in the uncomfortable position of having to negotiate several competing Polish, Jewish, and Soviet interests, and it seems that he was not faring well.

Sommerstein was aware that Jews were being indiscriminately targeted by the Nazis before he joined the Commission at Majdanek. Yitzhak Zuckerman (a well-known Jewish partisan who fought in the Warsaw Uprising) recalled Sommerstein’s anxiety over Stalin’s stance on the Jewish question, especially in the context of the wartime suffering of European Jewry. He had been hopeful of Stalin’s support, likely for both Jewish immigration to Israel and more proactive solutions to the destruction of Polish Jewry (i.e., reparations and aid, employment, housing, and perhaps more audible promises of tolerance for Jews under the PKWN). At a meeting in Moscow shortly after the PKWN manifesto had been posted in Chelm and before having been sent to Lublin, Sommerstein apprehensively approached Stalin “at the right moment” during a reception at the Kremlin and apparently (after a few glasses of wine) asked Stalin: “Here’s what happened to the

⁶⁰ “Polish-Jewish Circles in London Await Government Lead before Contacting Sommerstein,” *JTA*, September 11, 1944 (September 10, London), <http://www.jta.org/1944/09/11/archive/polish-jewish-circles-in-london-await-government-lead-before-contacting-sommerstein> (accessed April 8, 2015).

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

Jewish people and they were destroyed. Don't you think this question of the Jewish people, of those who survived, should be on the agenda of the international forum and receive an international solution?"⁶² According to Zuckerman, Stalin then "twisted the right side of his moustache and then the left" before replying – "*Budet!* (It will be done!)"⁶³ Zuckerman and Sommerstein looked at one another, neither of them knowing the meaning of Stalin's response. Zuckerman was apprehensive of the new Soviet rule but still considered the possibility that it would "be good for the Jews" – or at least "the Jewish remnant."⁶⁴ Sommerstein generally felt the same (even if he personally favored Jewish immigration to Palestine), but his work on the Commission was proving trying. In the absence of any clear signal from Stalin and with no official Soviet stance on the Jewish issue in newly liberated Poland yet apparent, Sommerstein was struggling between the need to publicize and emphasize the uniquely Jewish destruction in Poland abroad in order to make the tragedy known (and to obtain aid for reparations) and the task of acting in the greater interest of Poland as it was perceived by other members.

In a private conversation in Lublin with Zuckerman, Sommerstein revealed to him that he was depressed, and Zuckerman recalled how he got the impression that he felt alienated in Lublin.⁶⁵ Zuckerman and Sommerstein had discussed the extermination camps at Majdanek and Treblinka and speculated on the situation in western Poland. Zuckerman wrote about Lublin that "at that time, people were involved in the Jewish issue whom I hadn't known before and whom I didn't respect."⁶⁶ One might surmise that he was referring to the Polish members of the PKWN who opposed Zionism or failed to perceive the depth of Jewish suffering in the war or who were in some way alienating Jewish partisans fighting in the underground or in the actual Home Army.

⁶² Zuckerman, *A Surplus of Memory*, p. 570.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 568.

⁶⁵ Zuckerman, *A Surplus of Memory*, pp. 570-571.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 571.

On the other hand, he could have been referring to the actions of certain Jewish leaders in Lublin. Regardless of the actual reason for Zuckerman's distrust of those involved in the Jewish issue, his statement reveals that there were tensions between Sommerstein and others dealing with such questions – and one might guess that these tensions existed between Sommerstein and the other Commission members.

Although in the Communique the Commission relied heavily on eyewitness testimonies, it based much of its actual investigation on the “logic of proof.” When the Soviets documented wartime atrocity, they preferred to collect massive amounts of tangible and observable evidence rather than rely on eyewitness testimonies, but this does not necessarily mean they always disregarded such testimonies. In chapter three it will be discussed how the Commission selectively used eyewitness testimony to corroborate their own interpretations of material evidence. But by emphasizing the tendency to operate by the “logic of proof,” one can show how the erasure of Jewish suffering was so easily effected. Jeremy Hicks writes that “whereas western representations [of the Holocaust] rely on witness testimony, Soviet depictions operate on the logic of proof.”⁶⁷ One of the main arguments of Hicks's scholarship is that evidence of what is now called the Holocaust was actually meticulously collected by Soviet investigatory commissions, reporters, and filmmakers and presented without interpretation. The Commission collected evidence in order to determine the finest details about aspects of Majdanek such as daily regimes and nutrition, as well as the logistics of the gas chambers and means of extermination.⁶⁸ Witos also ordered that the

⁶⁷ Hicks, *First Films of the Holocaust*, p. 161.

⁶⁸ Presentation of evidence collected by the miscellaneous commissions, recorded by Piotr Sobolewski, *protokol* no. 2 of the Polish-Soviet Extraordinary Commission at Majdanek, “Soveshchanie sudebno-sledstvennoi kommissii,” pp. 2-12, Lublin, August 19, 1944, APMM, z. XXV, j.a. 4, l. 14-24.

special forensic-medical commission already working since August 4th be incorporated into the greater Commission's investigation. They would examine not only the survivors but the masses of corpses found at the camp – some of which were in mass graves, others of which were lying in various places around the camp, such as near the crematoria.

One example illustrating how the Commission operated by the logic of proof was evidenced in the medical team's examinations of several tens of individual corpses. They recorded on average a paragraph of characterizations for each corpse, noting details such as age, height, clothing, estimated nutritional intake, position and size of bullets in the skull, and whether or not hair remained on the corpses.⁶⁹ The Commission proceeded from micro-documentation to illuminating Majdanek's greater factory-like aspect of 'death-manufacturing'. Special forensic teams investigated the gas chambers and crematoria, noting details on structure and "collections of blue color" left on the walls.⁷⁰ The conclusions the Red Army officers made about the nature of Majdanek during their initial investigations were similar to those the Commission made couple of weeks later. Witos merged several smaller technical or medical commissions into the greater Commission, but many of these members had been involved since the earliest investigations simply as qualified specialists – specifically the Polish Professor Szylling-Syngalewicz of the Medical University of Lublin. A comparison of some of the early Red Army reports with those of the Commission highlight not only the exterminatory characteristic of Majdanek but also the systematic nature of killing.

⁶⁹ Report of the Forensic-Medical Commission on the exhumation and investigation of corpses found in pits, written by Professor Szylling-Syngalewicz, *protokol* no. 3, "Eksgumatsii i issledovaniia trupov iamy," pp. 1-12, Lublin, August 4-23 [specific date unclear], 1944, APMM, z. XXV, j.a. 5, l. 35-42.

⁷⁰ Report of the Forensic-Medical Commission on the crematoria, written by Professor Szylling-Syngalewicz, *protokol* no. 1, "Sudebno-meditsinskogo issledovaniia krematoriia," p. 2, Lublin, August 4-23 [specific date unclear], 1944, APMM, z. XXV, j.a. 5, [listek number indeterminable].

On the same day the Soviets entered the camp, army officers composed a report in which the corroborating testimony of the Soviet POW, V. P. Petrov, highlighted such characteristics. This was an eyewitness testimony that corroborated the tangible material evidence of mass extermination found at the site. Yet Petrov's observation that these murders were ideologically and ethnically motivated could not be proven based solely on the evidence visible to the officers. Petrov stated:

“Before the Red Army arrived the Germans burned 1,500 prisoners of war and civilians imprisoned in the camp. V. Petrov and others said that this was not the only case of such burning. In November 1943 the Germans burned 48,000 people among whom the majority were Jews and civilians. The burning was motivated by the fact that these people were deemed politically dangerous as they do not sympathize with the German order.”⁷¹

This excerpt from a short eleven-sentence preliminary report includes a reference to a mass killing and even notes that a large majority of them were Jews. The report points out systematic repetition of purposeful killing for ideological reasons. However, as was typical for Soviet reporting on Nazi atrocity, there is no reference to the antisemitic nature of Nazi ideology. Communists and Soviet POWs, of whom there were many at Majdanek, were imprisoned and killed for being non-sympathetic to the Germans. But Jews were not imprisoned and killed because of a conscious choice to oppose the German order or for their adherence to something the Germans deemed ideologically harmful but solely for their ethnicity. One could, in principle, choose not be a communist or a soldier – but ethnicity was perceived by the Germans as primordial. It is in this

⁷¹ Preliminary observations of the Red Army upon first encountering Majdanek, *akt* of the Red Army, signed by the Lieutenants A. M. Surgutakov and P. A. Radchenko, the soldiers G. P. Zhulenskii and V. Ia. Ol'khov, Sergeant A. T. Shevkun, and the former POW V. P. Petrov, Lublin, August 25, 1944, *TsAMO SSSR*, f. 233, o. 2374, d. 58, l. 35. Ippolitov made and verified a copy of the report on August 5, 1944, which is preserved in APMM, z. XXV, j.a. 5, l. 4. I have used the copy of the report.

way that the Soviet reports on Nazi atrocity against Jews failed to address the necessarily ethnic – i.e., Jewish – component inherent in Nazi ideology and, therefore, its genocidal policy. The materials from the Commission’s investigations heavily document the systematic nature of the Nazis’ crimes of what has since been interpreted as predetermined genocide of the Jews but do not attempt to address antisemitism as the cause.

In another Soviet report from the following day on July 26, Majdanek’s specific function as an extermination center was pointed out:

“At the end of 1941 in the outskirts of Lublin at Majdanek construction was begun of a concentration camp whose capacity recently reached 25,000 people. It was a camp for extermination, no one returned back from it.”⁷²

Then just a few lines down, the report – which was written by Red Army officers and verified by Senior Lieutenant Ippolitov in the Department of Information – explicitly highlights Jewish predominance among the victims (although in another report from around the same time he erased references to Jews):

“Prisoners were brought here from various countries of Europe: from France, Belgium, Holland, Denmark, Norway, and Czechoslovakia. These were primarily Jews (*Eto byli preimuschestvenno, evrei*).”⁷³

The report goes on to describe the basic aspects of the camp, including forced labor, food conditions, and the gas chambers and crematorium. It highlights other victims, such as Russian POWs, but it points to Jewish specificity in two other instances. One addresses a mass extermination of Jews on November 3, 1943. It describes how on that day SS officers played light

⁷² Follow-up observation and summary of Majdanek by the Red Army, *akt* of the Red Army, signed by Captain P. S. Popov and Lieutenant G. G. Marutov, p. 1, Lublin, August 26, 1944, *TsAMO SSSR*, f. 233, o. 2374, d. 58, l. 128. Ippolitov made and verified a copy of the report on August 10, 1944, which is preserved in APMM, z. XXV, j.a. 5, l. 5. I have used the copy of the report.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

tango and foxtrot music from morning into the night while they killed “18,000 Jews and Poles” both by mass shootings and by sending them to the gas chambers.⁷⁴ Here the report references Jews and Poles, but in a later *protokol* from August 24th during the Commission’s questionings, the SS officer being interrogated only mentions Jews when referring to the same mass extermination.⁷⁵ The Commission’s Chair, Witos, questioned SS-officer Shollen while the Polish secretary Piotr Sobolewski recorded the testimony. Shollen was in charge of the warehouse in which clothes collected from incoming prisoners were stored. What follows is an excerpt from the questioning:

Q: “How did the Germans treat Russian POWs?”

A: “With regard to Russians, I do not know exactly, but I know that on November 3, 1943, from 18-20,000 Jews were destroyed.”

Q: “From where did all the shoes and also the clothing from women and children that were found in the camp come?”

A: “These things belonged to the murdered, primarily Jews.”

Q: “What did they do with the corpses?”

A: “I heard that they burned them in the crematoria.”

The third and final reference to Jews in the early report from July 26th occurs in the closing line – “During the camp’s existence a few hundred thousand people were exterminated, more than 40,000 of whom were Jews from Lublin and its surrounding regions.”⁷⁶ In this instance the estimated number of 40,000 Jews refers only to those from the Lublin area and not those from

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 2 of the *akt*, l. 6.

⁷⁵ Questioning of SS-officer Shollen by Andrzej Witos at the general meeting to interview former prisoners and SS officers at Majdanek, recorded by Piotr Sobolewski, *protokol* no. 4 of the Polish-Soviet Extraordinary Commission, Lublin, August 24, 1944, p.2, APMM, z. XXV, j.a. 4, l. 36.

⁷⁶ Follow-up observation and summary of Majdanek by the Red Army, *akt* of the Red Army, signed by Captain P. S. Popov and Lieutenant G. G. Marutov, p. 2, Lublin, July 26, 1944, *TsAMO SSSR, f. 233, o. 2374, d. 58, l. 129*, copy signed by Ippolitov on August 10, 1944, in APMM, z. XXV, j.a. 5, l. 6.

other countries or regions of Poland. However, earlier in the same report it was mentioned that most of the people at Majdanek from other countries were, in fact, mostly Jews. Therefore, in the report itself it can be determined that the actual number of Jews killed was much higher than 40,000 and that most of the camp's victims were Jews.

From the above reports it was clear that Jews were specifically being targeted for extermination. Aside from ethnic specificity, the reports also pointed to the technical and systematic nature of extermination. To expand upon what was written about the nature of the camp above, in a concluding report by a medical and chemical expert commission on August 18, the members determined that “in the Lublin concentration camp at Majdanek, during the entire period of its 4-year existence, in accordance with a deeply thought out and logical system, the mass extermination of people who were specially brought in to be killed was carried out.”⁷⁷ This was a death camp for “the largest number of people.” On the same day that they established this report, many of the same members of the forensic-medical commission independent of the Polish-Soviet Commission (which had been working since August 4th) were then subsumed into the new forensic-medical commission established by Witos which was headed by the Polish member Dr. Ludwik Christians. They began the medical investigation the following day, and the members established that “at the fore of the most effective manifestation of German technology and culture was the gas used to poison people.”⁷⁸ A few days later after reviewing miscellaneous documentation on every aspect of the camp from daily nutritional protocols to methods used for gassing victims, the members of Commission came to the conclusion that

⁷⁷ Conclusion of the Forensic-Medical and Chemical-Technical Commissions, “Zakliucheniia,” p. 1, signed by Professor Szylling-Syngalewicz, August 18, 1944, Lublin, APMM, z. XXV, j.a. 4, l. 8.

⁷⁸ Presentation of evidence collected by the miscellaneous commissions, recorded by Piotr Sobolewski, *protokol* no. 2 of the Polish-Soviet Extraordinary Commission at Majdanek, “Soveshchanie sudebno-sledstvennoi kommissii,” p. 5, Lublin, August 19, 1944, APMM, z. XXV, j.a. 4, l. 17.

“in Lublin there existed a camp which the Germans themselves called an ‘extermination camp.’ For the extermination of the largest number of people they used various methods. Modes for nutrition, sustenance, work, and torture were also used for the mass extermination of the prisoners.”⁷⁹

In the few Red Army and Commission reports, it is both apparent that Majdanek functioned as an extermination camp in which death was organized on a massive scale under systematic and logical means and that its primary victims were Jews. The exterminatory nature of the camp was never questioned, and the available documents do not even suggest that the members of the Commission disputed the fact that Jews were, indeed, the primary victims. When the Commission met on August 24th and 25th to discuss the findings and to decide what should be written in a Communique to be published in the Soviet and Polish presses, the debates did not center on whether or not Jews actually constituted the largest number among the victims but whether or not to report as such.

In examining preliminary Soviet army reports and corroborating testimony from the Commission’s investigation a few weeks later, it is possible to recognize that, as Arkadi Zeltser has argued, “the Jewish topic [was] fully evident.”⁸⁰ As Zeltser argues further, not only had Soviet officers and soldiers begun to acknowledge Jewish victimhood but “more than a few” of them had even started “wonder[ing] why exactly the Nazis hated Jews so much.”⁸¹ This is apparent in at

⁷⁹ General conclusions by the Commission based on evidence gathered by the integration of miscellaneous commissions into the investigation, recorded by Piotr Sobolewski, *protokol* no. 3 of the Polish-Soviet Extraordinary Commission at Majdanek, [title indeterminable], p. 11, Lublin, August 22, 1944, APMM, z. XXV, j.a. 4, l. 23.

⁸⁰ Arkadi Zeltser, “Differing Views among Red Army Personnel about the Nazi Mass Murder of Jews,” *Kritika* 15, no. 3 (Summer 2014): p. 570.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 579.

least one of the questionings of a high-ranking SS officer named Ternes during the Commission's investigation:⁸²

Q: "What can you say about the number of those killed on 3 Nov 1943?"

A: "18,000 people."

Q: "Why do the Germans carry out mass exterminations of Jews?"

A: "Because in the program of the National Socialist Party it is said that Jews are a bad people and that they all must be destroyed."

It would seem that someone listening to or reading Ternes's response might have perceived that there was something particular about Nazi ideology which necessitated the annihilation of the Jewish people, but only Sommerstein interpreted it as such. As most of the Commission documents explicitly highlighting the prominence of Jews among the victims and their special singling out for harsher treatment in all camp matters (such as food rations) were based on the interviews of eye-witnesses, if perceived from a Soviet approach it is logical that the members would choose to disregard those references entirely or manipulate them in order to match a different narrative – even if they were many in number.⁸³ Witness testimonies are different in nature from the more tangible material-based evidence preferred by the Soviets. That is, eye witness accounts are subjective and interpretive, but the Soviets perceived the documentary evidence as indisputable.

It was also important during this time of flux in the transition to communist rule that Poles were not prohibited from mourning Majdanek as their own atrocity. Another wartime Soviet norm

⁸² Questioning of Senior SS-Obersturmführer Ternes by Professor N. I. Grashchenkov at the general meeting to interview former prisoners and SS officers at Majdanek, recorded by Piotr Sobolewski, *protokol* no. 4 of the Polish-Soviet Extraordinary Commission, p. 11, Lublin, August 24, 1944, APMM, z. XXV, j.a. 4, l. 45.

⁸³ *Ibid.*: Questioning of SS-officer Shollen by Witos, (p. 2), l. 36; Questioning of the Polish chemist Tadeusz Budzyń by Professor Szylling-Syngalewicz, (pp. 3-4), l. 37-38; Questioning of the German political prisoner Hans Shtalbe by Dr. Kudriavtsev, (p. 7), l. 41; Questioning of the Polish prisoner Andrzej Stanisławski by Procurator Zuzia Balcerzak, (p. 8), l. 42; Questioning of Senior SS-Obersturmführer Ternes by Professor N. I. Grashchenkov, (pp. 10-11), l. 46-47; Questioning of the Czech-Austrian communist Tomaček by Dr. Emil Sommerstein, (pp. 9-10), l. 45-46.

was to give tragedy a narrative of victory, but as Hicks writes regarding Majdanek: “Martyrdom to ultimate victory [was] no longer plausible.”⁸⁴ This is why the Soviets allowed a city-wide Catholic memorial mass to take place for mourning, why they allowed the local people to come to the camp daily, and – most importantly – why they allowed plans for a museum to proceed before the Commission had even finished its investigation.

Interestingly enough, Majdanek was not closed off to the ordinary citizens during the early days of liberation. Photographs and video footage show Poles from the city coming to observe the camp. Majdanek was not far from the city, and throughout the German occupation period Lublin’s inhabitants were aware that something horrific was happening at the camp on the outskirts of town. There were several photographs across the pages of *Izvestiia* and *Pravda* in August and September of 1944 depicting local Poles mourning their dead at Majdanek or simply observing the camp. Incidentally, many of the photos of local Poles visiting the camp were captured by Soviet cameramen. David Shneer writes that the decision to depict local Poles at the atrocity site was “ambiguous” but ultimately one that “rendere[d] it a non-Jewish place.”⁸⁵ One gets the sense that instead of actively trying to depict Majdanek as a place of greater Polish suffering, the cameramen initially simply refrained from inhibiting local Poles from doing it themselves. Yet Shneer’s analysis is one of photographs and film – the press reports, including the emotional pieces of Kriger, Ehrenburg, and Gorbатов and the more technical reports such as the Commission’s Communique, do not so strongly depict Polish suffering but follow the typical Soviet pattern of universalization of suffering. But the Commission’s overall investigation and debates on how to write the Communique tell us more than the actual finished products for the press because they show tension

⁸⁴ Hicks, *First Films of the Holocaust*, p. 169.

⁸⁵ Shneer, *Through Soviet-Jewish Eyes*, p. 162.

and not simply an uncontested Soviet monopoly on the narrative, as well as the perspective of local actors in the new regime rather than journalists whose specific jobs were to report on the war.

From the outset, Witos emphasized the specific Polish nature of Majdanek. In the end the Communique did not reflect his wishes. However, even if in the Soviet press Polish suffering was downplayed, the long-term effects as they actually unfolded in eastern Poland were much more nuanced. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to discuss those developments, but an analysis of the immediate post-liberation situation and procedures at Majdanek shows the setting from which the later memory work developed. In the following section it will first be shown how members of the Commission – the most important members of whom were also high-standing actors in the PKWN – debated the Jewish question and formulated early narratives of suffering at Majdanek for the press. A presentation and analysis of the final version of the Communique will follow. It is plausible that for the Polish members of the Commission, communist or otherwise, it was more important that Jewish specificity be downplayed rather than Polish suffering highlighted in this particular moment. But as plans for the museum developed, favoring Poles above other groups, including Jews, was a consistent trend. Furthermore, although Poles were not particularly highlighted in the Communique and were subsumed into greater “Slavonic” suffering, specific and emotive references to Polish suffering were maintained more frequently than those to other groups, even Soviet POWs.

CHAPTER THREE: FROM *PROTOKOL* TO PRESS: DEBATING THE COMMUNIQUE ON NAZI ATROCITY AT MAJDANEK

This chapter will address two debates at the end of the Commission's investigation in which members discussed how to frame Majdanek for the Communique they were preparing for the press. The Communique will receive special attention after the debates have been presented. During these debates – referred to as such in the protocols for broader events recorded by Piotr Sobolewski – Commission members specifically discussed questions of Jewish victimhood and its representation. That Jews were specially targeted by Nazis became most apparent on August 24th after the Commission intensely questioned survivors (including Poles and Soviet POWs) and SS officers. After finishing the interviews Dr. Kudriavtsev composed a general conclusion based on the results which he then presented to the other members. The first and most important debate took place shortly thereafter. This was a general debate at the camp that included the discussion of plans for the Communique among members of its editing committee, while the second debate was explicitly centered on the Communique and took place the following day on August 25th at the Lublin Court House. At this meeting, the purpose was to present the pre-confirmed draft for the Communique rather than actually discuss it. Sobolewski did not record the debate at the press conference to nearly the extent to which he covered the first one. This is because by the time the actual press conference occurred, all issues regarding the actual composition of the Communique had been decided by Kudriavtsev and Professor Grashchenkov. Having been present the day before, Sobolewski knew what was expected and seemingly recorded information more selectively. Therefore, the debate at the press conference will receive less attention than the first.

Andrzej Witos, Grashchenkov, and Emil Sommerstein conducted most of the interviews on August 24th, and film footage and photographs show them sitting together at a table in front of

barracks while one of them would individually hold the interview. Therefore, each was aware of what was being asked and the answers given, and in the debates Sommerstein and Grashchenkov spoke most frequently and most controversially.

Commission members followed a pattern of actually leaving references to Jewish victimhood in their initial documentation (there is no evidence that Sobolewski was ordered to remove or doctor references to Jews in the transcripts) and then downplaying it at the next level, regardless of whether it was for the preparation of a new ‘verified’ army report or for representation in the media. By examining how the Commission debated these issues for their official Communique, one can observe similar ‘information transfers’ and show how many distinct but inter-connected actors (i.e., Soviets, Polish communists, Polish non-communists, and Polish-Jewish communists) first determined and then ‘negotiated’ the place of the Jew in what has now been interpreted as the Holocaust.

Soviet writers such as Vasily Grossman, Boris Gorbатов, and Konstantin Simonov were sent to report on Majdanek as a continuation of the broader wartime reporting they had already been doing for three years. Rather than analyzing their reporting on Majdanek, it is more appropriate to focus on the Communique first published by the Commission on September 16th. The Communique allows one to directly observe how questions of victimhood were being formed and debated in the context of early Polish-Soviet relations. Those who composed the Communique were the actual actors in the new state institutions, rather than reporters or writers. Unfortunately, by focusing on the Communique it is only possible to observe how Jews were explicitly erased and not how Poles were favored. What follows is an examination of the debates within the Commission on how to depict the victims of the atrocities at Majdanek.

Debating questions of ethnic specificity and Jewish victimhood

On August 18th during a meeting to collate evidence collected by the miscellaneous commissions and to establish a plan for upcoming Commission work, Dr. Kudriavtsev invited those present to visit the Gestapo warehouse at 27 Chopin Street where they could observe an “exhibit” – a euphemism for the intact facility – evidencing mass extermination.⁸⁶ There he called those who were members of the press to appeal to the public to bring any evidence relating to the crimes and mass extermination at Majdanek to the Commission.⁸⁷ There were several moments such as this one during the investigation when various members of groups independent of one another, including journalists, investigated Majdanek and prepared information for the press. Such people would have undoubtedly been present on August 25th for the organized press conference at the Lublin Court House where general evidence of mass extermination at Majdanek would be presented. At 7:00 pm a special block of time was set aside to present and debate the draft of the Communique.⁸⁸ Before addressing this it is necessary to review what transpired the day before after Kudriavtsev presented his conclusion of the results of the interviews of prisoners and SS-officers, as the debate at the press conference was in many ways a continuation of the argument between Sommerstein and Grashchenkov at this time.⁸⁹

After finishing the interviews and hearing Dr. Kudriavtsev’s conclusion, Sommerstein, Grashchenkov, Professor Prozorovskii, Professor Białkowski, and Dr. Kudriavtsev argued over how to deal with the fact that those being questioned had several times singled out Jews as

⁸⁶ Summary of proceedings at the general meeting to integrate miscellaneous commissions into the official Commission, recorded by Piotr Sobolewski, *protokol* no. 1 of the Polish-Soviet Extraordinary Commission at Majdanek, p. 12, Lublin, August 18, 1944, APMM, z. XXV, j.a. 4, l. 24.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ Agreements and plan for concluding the Commission, presided over by Andrzej Witos, recorded by Piotr Sobolewski, *protokol* no. 5 of the Polish-Soviet Commission at Majdanek, pp. 5-6, Lublin, August 24, 1944, APMM, z. XXV, j.a. 4, l. 52-53.

⁸⁹ It is difficult to determine if this was an actual document prepared by Kudriavtsev or an unofficial speech by him given spontaneously.

receiving the harshest treatment and constituting the largest number of victims. It is worth mentioning some examples.

Grashchenkov was made aware that Jews were particularly targeted for their ethnicity (and not as intellectuals as he would later argue) when he questioned the senior lieutenant and SS-Obersturmführer Ternes. To Grashchenkov's question of why the Germans carry out mass exterminations of Jews Ternes replied: "Because in the program of the National Socialist Party it is said that Jews are a bad people and that they all must be destroyed."⁹⁰ Grashchenkov failed to interpret this as indicating the antisemitic component of Nazi ideology. When considering those who had been brought from other European countries, he did not distinguish the Jewish from the non-Jewish communists, even though the Czech-Austrian prisoner Tomaček, who had been arrested as a communist, after describing the horrible camp regime said that "it was always like that for us, but Jews bore a more difficult experience than we did."⁹¹

While mentioning those who had been brought from Greece, Holland, and Czechoslovakia, those being questioned specifically noted that they were Jews. For example, the Polish chemist Budzyń told Witos that "from Czechoslovakia...Jews arrived in crowds," while when asked if he had seen prisoners from Holland the prisoner Anton Benen – himself a Dutch national – answered "yes, they were primarily Jews who they [the Germans] then destroyed."⁹² Of course, it is true that the Jews were citizens of these other countries. But Jews had long been singled out as "other" – especially in Poland and the areas constituting Soviet territory – long before Hitler came to power.

⁹⁰ Questioning of Senior SS-Obersturmführer Ternes by Professor N. I. Grashchenkov at the general meeting to interview former prisoners and SS officers at Majdanek, recorded by Piotr Sobolewski, *protokol* no. 4 of the Polish-Soviet Extraordinary Commission, p. 11, Lublin, August 24, 1944, APMM, z. XXV, j.a. 4, l. 46.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁹² *Ibid.*: Questioning of the Polish chemist Tadeusz Budzyń by Professor Szylling-Syngalewicz and the questioning of the Dutch prisoner Anton Benen by Professor Prozorovskii, (pp. 6-7), l. 40-41.

But in this instance the Commission found it necessary for Jews to be considered first as citizens of the European countries from which they had been deported.

The Polish chemist Andrzej Stanisławski stated that he had seen “a lot of Russian POWs, Poles, and other nationalities” but later stated that “the largest number exterminated were Jews.”⁹³ The phrase “it was primarily Jews” was scattered all throughout the recorded responses. Earlier on August 19th the Commission met to discuss the materials collected thus far by the miscellaneous commissions, especially from the medical and technical experts. In the corresponding protocol it was written that there were three categories of prisoners – the first was Russian and Polish POWs, followed by criminals (which included communists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and homosexuals), and, lastly, “those whose only guilt was that they lived, walked, and breathed.”⁹⁴ In the document it is not indicated that these were Jews and Slavs (for at Majdanek there were many non-Jewish Poles, Russians, and Belarussians deported under Operation Ost, the Germans’ plan for clearing living space in the east). The German prisoner Hans Shtable in his interview in reference to the gas chambers said that “first it was Jews, then Russians and others.”⁹⁵ There are several references to non-Jewish Poles and Soviet citizens throughout the testimonies falling victim to the mass executions and gassings, as well. However, even though those who were questioned by the Commission all indicated that Majdanek was, indeed, an “international camp” (*mezhdunarodnyi lager’*, as frequently emphasized by the Soviets), they often added that there was still specificity, such as when Tomaček stated:

⁹³ Ibid., Questioning of the Polish prisoner Andrzej Stanisławski by Procurator Zuzia Balcerzak, (pp. 8-9), l. 42-43.

⁹⁴ General conclusions by the Commission based on evidence gathered by the integration of miscellaneous commissions into the investigation, section on the category of prisoners interned at Majdanek, recorded by Piotr Sobolewski, *protokol* no. 3 of the Polish-Soviet Extraordinary Commission at Majdanek, “Kategorii zakliuchennykh,” p. 2, Lublin, August 22, 1944, APMM, z. XXV, j.a. 4, l. 27.

⁹⁵ Questioning of the German political prisoner Hans Shtalbe by Dr. Kudriavtsev at the general meeting to interview former prisoners and SS officers at Majdanek, recorded by Piotr Sobolewski, *protokol* no. 4 of the Polish-Soviet Extraordinary Commission, p. 7, Lublin, August 24, 1944, APMM, z. XXV, j.a. 4, l. 41.

“I should say that people very often ended up at Majdanek not for internment in the camp, but specifically for extermination.”⁹⁶

Considering that everyone on the Commission agreed that Majdanek was an extermination camp based on the systematic destruction of human beings, if the largest group among the ethnicities represented were Jewish (or when classified by nationality it was apparent that the majority of said nationals were Jewish) why would Commission members – except for Sommerstein – fail to interpret the Jewish fate as genocide? This is because these witness accounts do not necessarily in and of themselves imply genocidal policy. But the fact that former prisoners consistently pointed out Jewish suffering while Grashchenkov and Kudriavtsev preferred to downplay it suggests that there was a conscious effort to cover-up these references to Jewish suffering. While it is true that knowledge about what has since been interpreted as the Holocaust was not very widespread at the time, it should be noted that the Communique did not obscure references to specific massacres of Poles or Soviet POWs like they did to those referencing Jews.

The debate began with some minor considerations which were “important for history,” but these were resolved quickly.⁹⁷ Sommerstein then moved to the issues that he considered more ‘important for history.’ Tired of constant references to Majdanek as an “international camp,” he argued that while several nationalities were represented in the camp, it was only the Jews who suffered “indiscriminate extermination.”⁹⁸ This was precisely why Sommerstein wanted to have a

⁹⁶ Questioning by the wartime investigator of the Military Prosecutor’s Office of the First Belorussian Front Justice Major Krasnov of the Austrian-Czech prisoner Ludwik Tomaček, *protokol* no. 2 of the Red Army, “Protokol przesłuchania Ludwika Tomaszka,” trans. from Polish by Jadwiga Kliks, “Doprosza sviditelia,” Lublin, August 12, 1944, APMM, z. VII (Pamiętniki, relacje, ankiety byłych więźniów [Former prisoners’ diaries, accounts, and questionnaires]), kolekcja (collection) 135 (Protokoły przesłuchań OKBZN [Interrogation reports of the District Commission for the Prosecution of Nazi Crimes in Poland]), l. 66. This interview was from an earlier date than the other protocol from which he is quoted previously. But these files were included in the investigation and were used to compose the preliminary report discussed by Witos for the first general meeting of the Commission.

⁹⁷ Debate between Sommerstein and Grashchenkov (and others) over how to interpret the testimonies obtained from the interviews of former prisoners and SS-officers with several references to their presentation in the Communique, recorded by Piotr Sobolewski, *protokol* no. 5 of the Polish-Soviet Commission at Majdanek, “Preniia,” p. 4, Lublin, August 24, 1944, APMM, z. XXV, j.a. 4, l. 51.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

special section on Jews in the Communique. At this moment he urged the Commission to recall that Budzyń mentioned that most of the international transports were Jews who had carried with them German propaganda posters promising a new place to live and work. He told the other members that Hitler had ordered all Jews in the occupied countries of Europe to wear special “*znaki*” (symbols – i.e., yellow Stars of David) and asked them to reflect on why such a camp was in Lublin and not somewhere in Denmark, reminding them that the royal Danish family had been outspoken against Hitler’s antisemitic policies.⁹⁹

For Sommerstein, this was clearly genocide, but he knew that others would have trouble seeing it that way – and not just the non-Jewish Commission members. The Communique was being prepared for an international audience, and he argued that Jewish singularity would not “be grasped overseas” if Jewish extermination was not distinguished “from the larger question of the mass extermination of representatives of 22 nationalities of Europe.”¹⁰⁰ He argued that Majdanek was built in Lublin “far away from European societies” so that Hitler could carry out his goal of exterminating first all of the Jews of Poland and then those of other European countries.

Without denying the likelihood of antisemitism among the Commission members, one can interpret Sommerstein’s sense of urgency in this debate as stemming from his frustration that he knew that he was in a privileged position to acutely gauge that Hitler had enacted a genocide of European Jewry while the other Commission members would not as easily interpret it as such.¹⁰¹ This was because while simultaneously working on the Commission to investigate crimes specific to Majdanek, he was dealing with Jews who had been hiding in forests or on farms during the war

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ “Moscow Releases Names of French Jews Killed by Gestapo in “death Camp” in Poland,” *JTA*, August 21, 1944 (August 20, Moscow), <http://www.jta.org/1944/08/21/archive/moscow-releases-names-of-french-jews-killed-by-gestapo-in-death-camp-in-poland> (accessed April 8, 2015) – “Thus far only one record book with six hundred names has been made accessible to the press. Scores of such books with thousands of Jewish names are expected to be “deciphered” [by Sommerstein] within the near future.”

and meeting with Jewish partisans who had been fighting in the Polish underground. Therefore, he was in a position to interpret the wartime fate of the Jews as separate from the greater devastation to other peoples. He urged other members of the Committee to see the situation similarly and argued for the necessity to highlight the unique fate of Jews and their overwhelming predominance among the victims of the camp. Yet, the other members of the Commission were not in agreement.

Grashchenkov quickly voiced opposition to Sommerstein's suggestion to highlight the unique Jewish fate in a special section in the Communique. He stated that it would "hardly [be] advisable to jump so scrupulously to such an approach."¹⁰² He preferred to see the victims as intellectuals who happened to be Jewish rather than Jews who happened to be intellectuals. He stated that the Germans had targeted the intellectuals of all countries and that "Jews underwent extermination as the intellectual strength of these countries" and that "in consideration of this, it is necessary to cite the number of facts and mass extermination of Jews as *citizens of these countries* [emphasis mine]."¹⁰³ Yet, they were not exterminated as the intellectual strength of these countries but as Jews who happened to constitute much of their intellectual strength. What is most significant is that Grashchenkov opposed highlighting Jews but did not *deny* that they had indeed been singled out. Instead, he argued that the international Jewish victims should be framed as citizens of those countries and not as Jews. He stated that it would be better to give "one good announcement on the mass destruction of the citizens" rather than establishing "a communique of special consideration of particular nationalities."¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Debate between Sommerstein and Grashchenkov (and others) over how to interpret the testimonies obtained from the interviews of former prisoners and SS-officers with several references to their presentation in the Communique, recorded by Piotr Sobolewski, *protokol* no. 5 of the Polish-Soviet Commission at Majdanek, "Preniia," p. 4, Lublin, August 24, 1944, APMM, z. XXV, j.a. 4, l. 51.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., (pp. 4-5), l. 51-52.

Professor Prozorovskii, a Soviet member of the Commission, stepped in and reemphasized the purpose for the Commission's work at Majdanek in the first place. He indicated that this would be a continuation of the similar sort of trials the Soviets had done at Khar'kov and, therefore, agreed with Grashchenkov that the focus should be on proving the Germans' guilt without highlighting special cases of suffering.¹⁰⁵ The historian Alexander Prusin writes that the Khar'kov trial in 1943, as the first Soviet war crimes tribunal, marked a turn by which the Soviets would try to prove the guilt of the entire German nation for political means – specifically for showing that Nazism was a threat to “the entire ‘Soviet people’ without ethnic distinction,” extremely downplaying Jewish suffering when necessary.¹⁰⁶ He writes that at the Khar'kov trial witnesses were used for the sole purpose of describing the German crimes. The Commission's investigation of Majdanek followed this pattern because the camp was legally under Red Army control, and while the PKWN was not a Soviet puppet, many Soviet hands did control its strings.

After a period in which Sommerstein continued to implore the other members to see the necessity of highlighting specific Jewish victimhood, Dr. Kudriavtsev interjected and affirmed that “under no circumstance can the question of mass exterminations of a people be separated from the general Majdanek tragedy,” calling upon his own authority as vice-president of the Commission to settle the question once and for all. He immediately followed this with – “Majdanek is an international camp of death that was a prison for all nationalities of Europe.”¹⁰⁷

Dr. Kudriavtsev went on to argue that “neither do we highlight the question of the mass extermination of Soviet POWS, we say only that a large number of Soviet citizens were killed at

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., (p. 5), l. 51.

¹⁰⁶ Alexander Prusin, “‘Fascist Criminals to the Gallows!’: The Holocaust and Soviet War Crimes Trials, December 1945–February 1946,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 17, no. 1 (Spring 2003): pp. 5-6.

¹⁰⁷ Debate between Sommerstein and Grashchenkov (and others) over how to interpret the testimonies obtained from the interviews of former prisoners and SS-officers with several references to their presentation in the Communiqué, recorded by Piotr Sobolewski, *protokol* no. 5 of the Polish-Soviet Commission at Majdanek, “Preniia,” pp. 4-5, Lublin, August 24, 1944, APMM, z. XXV, j.a. 4, l. 51-52.

Majdanek.”¹⁰⁸ Yet this claim was not reflected in the Communique itself. Perceiving Sommerstein’s despair, Dr. Kudriavtsev paused and specifically addressed his stance. He said that while he understood Sommerstein’s position “as a representative of his people” who “especially points out the extermination of the Jews of Poland and Europe” it was necessary to show evidence of the murder of all nationalities – “*no mne kazhetsia, chto my dolzhny govorit’ o vsekh narodnostiakh* (It seems to me that we should speak of all nationalities).”¹⁰⁹ Yet in the context of the debate, one hears rather “It seems to me that we should not speak of Jews.” Thus it was decided to refrain from highlighting any ethnic specificity. Grashchenkov called for a meeting the following day to actually compose the text of the Communique which was to be based solely on facts proving the German atrocities.

Sommerstein had tried to convince the Soviet members to favor highlighting the Jews by framing the Germans’ indiscriminate murder of them as a threat to the safety of Bolshevism in Europe.¹¹⁰ But Sommerstein was a reluctant communist, and this was likely not his own personal logic for needing a special section on Jews in the Communique but rather a way to convince the Soviet members to approve it. However, after Grashchenkov initially expressed opposition, other Soviet members Professors Prozorovskii and Kudriavtsev also voiced their agreement that specific references to Jewish suffering be avoided. If Professor Białkowski voiced any support for Sommerstein or argued that references to Poles be highlighted, such assertions were not recorded.

The next day on August 25th, Andrzej Witos opened the press conference at the Lublin Court House with the announcement that the work of the Polish-Soviet Commission to Investigate Crimes at Majdanek had come to an end. He said that it was necessary to review the text of the

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 5 (l. 52).

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., (p. 4), l. 51.

Communique so that this document would have a historical significance. Considering that “soon the whole world [would] know about the crimes at Majdanek,” he reemphasized the need to simply present evidence quickly.¹¹¹ One perceives that Witos was speaking to the Soviet members’ wishes that specifically a communist state would first reveal evidence of this unprecedented Nazi extermination camp to the world. There was a strong sense of appealing to the post-war order in his speech. That is, he said that “perhaps many politicians and diplomats, having learned of the truth of German crimes at Majdanek, will not repeat the same mistakes for which millions of innocent people brutally paid with their blood.”¹¹² Here the implication was that the new communist world order would restore peace, and it seems that Witos was implicitly directing these comments towards the Allies.

Afterwards Grashchenkov read the project for the text of the Communique and presented a working draft. Importantly, he asked those in attendance to pay attention not only to the internal content but to the form of the Communique itself.¹¹³ This is significant because it illustrates the importance of framing in the context of reporting wartime atrocity, a practice which was especially important for Majdanek. Sobolewski then indicated that Grashchenkov formed the text on the premises of what had been gathered by the special editing commission during the debate that had taken place the previous day. This means that one of the most important goals was to recast references to Jewish suffering in terms of universal victimhood. This was a conscious choice, although whether or not it was an inherently antisemitic one will be addressed later.

¹¹¹ Opening speech by Witos at the general meeting for all members of the Commission to conclude the investigation at the Lublin Court House, recorded by Piotr Sobolewski, *protokol* no. 6 of the Polish-Soviet Commission at Majdanek, p. 1, Lublin, August 25, 1944, PMM, z. XXV, j.a. 4, l. 54.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Grashchenkov’s presentation of his draft of the Communique at the press conference following the general meeting at the Lublin Court House, *ibid.*

After Grashchenkov read the text, a “lively” (*ozhivlennyye*) debate (likely a euphemism for ‘heated’) occurred.¹¹⁴ And yet, Sobolewski recorded none of the actual content but instead proceeded directly to state that Sommerstein agreed to Grashchenkov’s text. A more nuanced reading of the document suggests that during this press conference on August 25th those present engaged directly with Sommerstein. Not only that, but there were likely specific references to discussions on Polish representation which were also left out. Both cases would provide unfavorable documentation attesting to tensions. So many details were preserved in the documents regarding the first debate because it was spontaneous, while the debate at the press conference, on the other hand, occurred as part of a pre-organized event for the public. Therefore, debate was likely more regulated, and, as previously mentioned, Sobolewski was probably practicing a form of self-censorship.

Although unsuccessful in convincing Grashchenkov to create a special section for Jews in the Communique, Sommerstein eventually conceded that Grashchenkov’s text “accommodates everything that needs to be said about the concentration camp at Majdanek and what was found through the investigation.”¹¹⁵ That he considered the text of the Communique as accommodating all that should be said about Majdanek is simply not true. Sommerstein’s main duty within the PKWN was to secure war reparations and to repatriate Polish citizens, but his most immediate concern was over those Polish Jews who had fled to the Soviet Union at the beginning of the war and who might now return. Yet at a broader level he was most worried about the fate of the Jews in Poland and elsewhere, knowing that they were being killed indiscriminately. He was appealing to Stalin and confiding in Yitzak Zuckerman that he was depressed and that he was alienated in

¹¹⁴ Sobolewski’s summary of debate at the press conference upon the presentation of Grashchenkov’s draft of the Communique at the Lublin Court House, *ibid.*

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

Lublin. That he was at extreme odds with Grashchenkov and the other Polish members contributed to his depression and feelings of alienation. Sommerstein may have eventually agreed to Grashchenkov's text because he thought it would perhaps facilitate a smoother transition for Jews returning to Lublin and the newly liberated territories and that it would be easier for him to procure Soviet assistance for reparations if he appeared to be cooperative. Highlighting Jews in the press could have also further antagonized local Poles who were already opposed to Soviet rule. A final consideration for why Sommerstein ultimately approved of Grashchenkov's text is that perhaps he may have eventually actually considered it better that Nazi atrocities against Jews were framed as universal.¹¹⁶ Sommerstein was in a unique position in which he was able to see that Jewish life in Poland and Eastern Europe had been nearly completely destroyed but that the war had not eradicated antisemitism by any means. Therefore, he had a real incentive to see a successful implementation of communist rule in Poland. This was before the infamous post-war Polish pogroms against Jews when it was still conceivable that Jewish life might be revived. Sommerstein's main goal, after all, was to repatriate thousands of Jews *back* to Poland. Highlighting Jews, after all, would likely have antagonized the local Poles who resisted communist rule. Continuing to insist upon it might have antagonized the non-Jewish Polish communists in the PKWN. Sommerstein perhaps foresaw that persisting on the issue might have unpleasant ramifications for Jews in the complicated triangle of Soviet-Jewish-Polish relations in newly liberated Poland.

Yet, this does not mean that Sommerstein still did not try to insert more nuanced references to Jews in the Communiqué. Apparently he had only "two personal modifications" for inclusion

¹¹⁶ For why the assimilated Polish and Soviet filmmakers at Majdanek "de-Judaized" the camp in the context of Jews perhaps *wanting* to do so and for a discussion of how Jews, having the most invested in the communist project, would have preferred to see themselves primarily Soviet citizens and would have, therefore, themselves perhaps wanted to subsume Jewish suffering into more universal frameworks see Shneer, *Through Soviet-Jewish Eyes*, p. 169.

in Grashchenkov's text. The first was to note that the Germans also sent bodies to the crematorium that were still half-alive. Secondly, he wanted to emphasize that the Germans received financial revenue from the personal property belonging to those they killed. Here he was explicitly referencing a group of Czech Jews who upon their arrival at Majdanek in luxury train cars were stripped of their property, interned, and gassed shortly afterwards. He wanted to emphasize the widely practiced "German propaganda trick" by which German authorities would post signs claiming that Jews were being relocated for work and that they should board luxury passenger trains with their finest belongings.¹¹⁷ Under questioning by Witos, the Polish chemist from Lublin named Budzyń – who was referenced several times in the Communique – pointed out that many of these Jews had carried with them German propaganda posters promising a new place for them to live and work. First of all, as it was known that the Germans were distributing such propaganda posters to Jews both in Germany and in the countries they occupied, Sommerstein likely considered that even if the reference to Jews on this matter was removed in the Communique – which it was – that Jews abroad might be able to read between the lines and decipher that the Dutch, French, Czech, Slovak, German and other nationals listed as being deported to Majdanek were actually mostly Jewish representatives of those nationalities. Secondly, by particularly wanting to include references to war crimes with a financial aspect, Sommerstein considered that perhaps it would speedily facilitate funds for war reparations, particularly for the Jews in Lublin and eastern Poland returning from hiding or fighting in the forests or countryside who were in dire need of the most basic necessities.¹¹⁸ Although special funds for Jewish relief would likely stoke

¹¹⁷ Minutes on Emil Sommerstein's input for Grashchenkov's draft of the Communique, recorded by Piotr Sobolewski, *protokol* no. 6 of the Polish-Soviet Commission at Majdanek, p. 1, Lublin, August 25, 1944, APMM, z. XXV, j.a. 4, l. 54.

¹¹⁸ "Restoration of Looted Property, Full Rights, Promised Polish Jews by New Committee," *JTA*, July 24, 1944 (July 25, London), <http://www.jta.org/1944/07/25/archive/restoration-of-looted-property-full-rights-promised-polish-jews-by-new-committee> (accessed April 8, 2015); "Jewish Relief Committee Organized in Liberated Poland: Hopes for Aid from America," *JTA*, September 6, 1944 (Lublin, September 5), <http://www.jta.org/1944/09/06/archive/jewish-relief-committee-organized-in-liberated-poland-hopes-for-aid-from-america> (accessed April 8, 2015); "International Conference of Federations of Polish Jews

envy among the locals against Jews, Sommerstein reasoned that if people knew that Jews suffered particularly harshly under Hitler's policies then they would be sympathetic and desire to help them. It is now known that the war did not instill local sympathy for the Jews but instead exacerbated tensions. Yet at the time Sommerstein did not perceive that attitudes would remain so harsh.

The debate on August 25th ended with Andrzej Witos approving Grashchenkov's plan for the Communique after which he told the committee to have a final version ready no later than August 30th. For the Soviet and Polish members besides Sommerstein, the primary objective was to collect detailed evidence that simply proved the crimes. It was their goal to then use evidence against the Germans in post-war trials and at the peace conference. The crimes would then be interpreted as universally affecting all nationalities interned or killed at Majdanek. But the specific suffering of Polish people would be emphasized when the circumstance allowed.¹¹⁹

At the same time, albeit for different reasons, the Allies in the West likewise did not perceive Sommerstein's pleas for assistance to Jews and recognition of their devastation as seriously as they might have. Jeremy Hicks writes that the west had a long wartime tradition of equating Soviet atrocity reports in the east with propaganda.¹²⁰ Although Sommerstein had been appealing to the Allies (primarily to those in London, where the Polish Government-in-Exile

Called," *JTA*, August 14, 1944, <http://www.jta.org/1944/08/14/archive/international-conference-of-federations-of-polish-jews-called> (accessed April 8, 2015); "Jewish Organization in America and Canada Plan to Send Delegations to Poland," *JTA*, September 10, 1944, (September , New York), <http://www.jta.org/1944/09/10/archive/jewish-organization-in-america-and-canada-plan-to-send-delegations-to-poland> (accessed April 8, 2015); Emil Sommerstein's conversations with Yitzhak Zuckerman in Lublin on the issue of Jewish repatriation to Poland, the devastation of Polish Jewry, and the dire need for Jewish assistance in *Zuckerman, Surplus of Memory*, pp. 569-571.

¹¹⁹ See, for example, the excerpt from Witos's speech: "It is necessary to emphasize the terrible and heinous crimes (even resorting to gas) to identify how the Germans exterminated people, as well as the danger of Germanism for *Poland* and its neighbors. At the peace conference all material on the atrocities the Germans should be used." Opening speech of Andrzej Witos on the integration of miscellaneous commissions at Majdanek into the Commission for a collective investigation, recorded by Piotr Sobolewski, *protokol* no. 1 of the Polish-Soviet Extraordinary Commission at Majdanek, p. 1, Lublin, August 18, 1944, APMM, z. XXV, j.a. 4, l. 10. See also the debate between Sommerstein and Grashchenkov (and others) over how to interpret the testimonies obtained from the interviews of former prisoners and SS-officers with several references to their presentation in the Communique, recorded by Piotr Sobolewski, *protokol* no. 5 of the Polish-Soviet Commission at Majdanek, "Preniia," pp. 4-5, Lublin, August 24, 1944, APMM, z. XXV, j.a. 4, l. 51-52 and the opening speech by Witos at the general meeting for all members of the Commission to conclude the investigation at the Lublin Court House, recorded by Piotr Sobolewski, *protokol* no. 6 of the Polish-Soviet Commission at Majdanek, p. 1, Lublin, August 25, 1944, PMM, z. XXV, j.a. 4, l. 54.

¹²⁰ Hicks, *First Films of the Holocaust*, p. 77.

remained) for help and recognition of the Jewish fate, it was only at the end of October that the US Ambassador to Russia Averill Harriman issued a statement affirming that the “German atrocities on the Eastern Front, particularly the killing of large masses of Jews, are not and cannot be exaggerated.”¹²¹

It is odd that in both debates no other Poles are recorded as expressing disagreement with the Soviet members or arguing for highlighting broader Polish suffering in the Communique – especially Witos. In his memoirs, Nikita Khrushchev wrote that he always knew that Witos was an “insincere” communist and that he had been able to particularly confirm this when he was meeting with him in Lublin in late summer 1944.¹²² One can assume in his role as Chairman of the Commission he may have frequently clashed with the Soviet members. However, there is no documentation in the Commission proceedings of debate comparable to that which exists between Sommerstein and Grashchenkov, perhaps because it would have been politically incorrect for Sobolewski to have recorded conversations highlighting troubled relations between the Polish and Soviet members during this time. The Soviets had much more at stake with ethnic Poles than with Jews. But considering Witos’s character and position and the fact that he had emphasized the particular suffering of the Polish people when the Commission commenced, it is odd that there is nothing indicating he contested Grashchenkov’s plan for the Communique. Yet even though he was the President of the Commission, it seems that his role was largely symbolic and that his duties were more organizational in nature. For example, in his memoirs he said that a lot was already

¹²¹ “American Ambassador to Russia Reports on German Massacres of Jews on Eastern Front,” *JTA*, October 26, 1944, Washington DC, <http://www.jta.org/1944/10/27/archive/american-ambassador-to-russia-reports-on-german-massacres-of-jews-on-eastern-front> (accessed April 8, 2015).

¹²² Nikita Khrushchev, *Commissar, 1918-1945*, vol. 1 of *Memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev*, ed. Sergei Khrushchev (University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 2004), p. 617.

written about Majdanek and that he could add very little, but the little he did mention about his duties as Chair concerned disagreements over whether to allow the public to purchase the belongings of victims found in the smaller Nazi warehouse at 17 Chopin Street – that is, enact measures that would facilitate plunder – in order to appraise how much the Nazis themselves had plundered.¹²³ He appealed to the Court, but the rest of the Commission failed to take the matter further. He then stated that he took no further interest in this matter, but one can gauge that he showed less interest in other matters related to the Commission's work, as well. This was because he was preoccupied preparing his own project for land reform which he presented on September 5th.¹²⁴ Therefore, as Witos's responsibility within the PKWN was to negotiate land reform, it seems that he conceded special Polish considerations for the Commission and Communiqué in exchange for an easier time negotiating what he perceived as more pressing matters of agricultural reform. Khrushchev indicated that Poles were vehemently opposed to collectivization and that agricultural reform was a serious topic in Lublin while he was there in late summer of 1944. Witos was eventually dismissed from his position as Head of the Department of Agriculture by October “on the grounds that he was sabotaging land reform,”¹²⁵ and it is worth noting that the collectivization of agriculture never happened in Poland.

Furthermore, it was also in ethnic Poles' interests to downplay Jewish suffering at Majdanek. Therefore, although displeased that Poles were not highlighted, it possibly sufficed for Witos that at least Jews were not emphasized, either, even though it was apparent that they were Majdanek's primary victims. However, it is also plausible that his objections were simply not

¹²³ Andrzej Witos, *Wszystko, co niosło życie: wspomnienia*, compiled by Czesław Brzoza (Wojnicz: Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Ziemi Wojnickiej, 1998), p. 183.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 184-185. Most of his memoir addresses his agricultural reform and his general role in the PKWN. He does not mention Jews and only very little is said about Majdanek.

¹²⁵ Robin Gates Elliot, “Saddling the Cow: The Collectivization of Agriculture in Poland, 1948-1956,” (PhD diss., Georgetown University, 2007), p. 58.

recorded. It also does not seem plausible that the other seven Polish members had nothing to say, especially as they had initiated the Commission in the first place. Yet although the Commission did not overtly emphasize Polish suffering, it was not obscured like that of Jewish victimhood. In fact, a number of emotive references to Polish loss were retained from the interviews in the text while others were omitted.

Even if the Commission operated by the “logic of proof,” its members still understood the significance of commentary, and this is why they argued so heatedly over how to compose the Communique. Even though reports were appearing in the Soviet press before the Commission finished its investigation, the Commission’s report would serve as a more official account, and the investigation was conducted with the express purpose of using the materials for post-war legal trials. In the previous section it was shown how the Commission conducted its investigation under “the logic of proof.” The ultimate goal was to prove the Germans’ guilt and show how they committed their crimes, a point Grashchenkov, Witos, and Sommerstein all reiterated. The Commission knew that it could not present a Communique completely void of the more emotive perspectives eyewitness testimonies provide, as Majdanek represented too much of a psychological and conceptual break. Yet recognizing the subjectivity of eyewitness testimony, the Commission chose to rely only on those which were consistent with their own interpretation. Therefore, the Commission could include a reference to Polish suffering from a witness but justify consciously discarding that same witness’s reference to Jewish suffering because it departed from the pattern of ‘present, prove, and condemn.’

The Communique in the press

The Communique on Majdanek is similar to previous Soviet wartime reports on the Holocaust in that it focuses on proving German crimes through tangible documentation. They are similar to those of Krasnodar or Khar'kov trials, for example, in which Soviet writers such as Aleksei Tolstoi and Ilya Ehrenburg “laid bare the industrial and racial character of Nazi extermination.”¹²⁶ Soviet representations from 1943 onward of what is now known as the Holocaust increasingly reflected this aspect of Nazi killing – just not that Jews were the primary victims. Comparing the proceedings of the Polish-Soviet Extraordinary Commission at Majdanek with their Communique helps illuminate the process by which Jews were not interpreted as the primary victims of Nazi Genocide. The goal of the Commission was ultimately to produce a Communique that “in concordance with what was given in all of the collected research materials” would serve as a “condemnation of the guilt of German fascism.”¹²⁷ Members were expected to lay out in the press “all material...indicating the evil of the Germans at Majdanek.”¹²⁸ That is, the Commission was to prove Germany’s guilt by using uncontested documentary evidence while focusing less attention on the victims themselves.

The Communique was published in *Pravda* in the Soviet press on September 16th and in the Polish newspaper *Nowe Życie* on September 20th.¹²⁹ It contained a general opening statement followed by seven separate sections on all aspects of the camp, including its exterminatory nature, the categories of prisoners, tortures and reprisals, whole-sale shooting, asphyxiation by gas,

¹²⁶ Jeremy Hicks, “‘Soul Destroyers’: Soviet Reporting of Nazi Genocide and its Perpetrators at the Krasnodar and Khar’kov Trials,” *History* 98 (October 2013): p. 532.

¹²⁷ Grashchenkov’s conclusion for developing the Communique after the debate following the interviews of former prisoners and officers, recorded by Piotr Sobolewski, *protokol* no. 5 of the Polish-Soviet Commission at Majdanek, “Preniia,” pp. 5, Lublin, August 24, 1944, APMM, z. XXV, j.a. 4, l. 52.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ Both of the Russian and Polish versions of the texts are identical in content. An English booklet version published by the Propaganda Department in Lublin in 1944 also exists. This text corresponds directly to what was written in both the Soviet and Polish press, and, therefore, I will quote from this text instead of using my own translation.

attempts to erase evidence of mass murder, and the robbery of victims' possessions. The structure of the Communique consisted of essentially verbatim presentations of the conclusions made in the reports by the Commission members and the secondary commissions, such as the Medical-Forensic Commission headed by Professor Szylling-Syngalewicz, during the actual investigation interwoven with references to eyewitness accounts from the interviews of former prisoners and SS-officers conducted on August 24th. The Communique was not a platform for sharing wartime experience in the camp, but rather these eyewitness accounts were used only to corroborate the material evidence presented.

The Commission needed the eyewitness accounts because they elucidated that the hundreds of cans of Cyclone-B found at Majdanek had been used to gas human beings and the crematoria to burn their corpses.¹³⁰ This break is evident in the opening of the Communique in which it was written:

“The facts discovered by the Commission in its investigation of the crimes committed by the Germans in Lublin far exceed in brutality and barbarity the monstrous crimes committed by the German fascist invaders of which international public opinion is already aware.”¹³¹

Here Grashchenkov makes clear that Majdanek was unprecedented.¹³² Importantly for the Soviet Union and the PKWN, this information would be revealed for the first time by a communist

¹³⁰ This photographic ‘break’, or, the notion that photographic evidence at Majdanek could no longer stand alone is presented in Shneer, *Through Soviet-Jewish Eyes*, pp. 156-157.

¹³¹ Andrzej Witos, Professor N. I. Grashchenkov, and Dr. D. I. Kudriavtsev et al., “Communique of the Polish-Soviet Extraordinary Commission for Investigating the Crimes Committed by the Germans in the Majdanek Concentration Camp in Lublin” (Lublin: Information and Propaganda Department of the Polish Committee of National Liberation, 1944), p. 3.

¹³² For more information on the unprecedented atrocities at Majdanek and the camp as a “psychological break,” see Jeremy Hicks, “Too Gruesome to be Fully Taken in”: Konstantin Simonov’s “The Extermination Camp” As Holocaust Literature,” *The Russian Review* 72, no. 2 (April 2013): pp. 242-259.

government. This would lend communism moral authority in the post-war order – an explicitly stated goal of the Commission – but would also ensure Soviet credibility among the Allies.

Both the western and Soviet publics were already aware of German atrocity. But until this point they were unaware that there were camps all over in Poland in which “the criminal Hitler government organized the massacre of whole sections of the population whom they regarded as undesirable, primarily the intellectuals of the occupied countries of Europe, Soviet and Polish prisoners of war, and Jews” and that at Majdanek “[t]he prisoners were systematically exterminated and fresh transports of prisoners arrived to take their place.”¹³³ In defining the categories of prisoners at Majdanek, it was written that this whole-sale extermination of peoples was “established by” passports and other documents of the victims belonging to citizens of different countries of occupied Europe, the register of deaths which the Germans kept, and the evidence presented by a number of witnesses. They then used these three forms to interpret that “[t]hus, the camp was a place for the wholesale extermination of different nationalities of Europe.”¹³⁴ Yet this same eye-witness evidence would not be used to indicate that Majdanek was an overwhelmingly Jewish camp. Adding “and Jews” to the end of the list of those targeted gives recognition to Jewish death, yet preceding this with a reference to “the intellectuals of the occupied countries of Europe” or a long list of other nationalities clouds the fact that these were often separate categories for the *same* people. Yet it is worth mentioning, as David Shneer writes, that Majdanek was “by far the least Jewish of any extermination camp.”¹³⁵ Even in light of Sommerstein’s evidence and argumentation, it was perhaps too early to fully apprehend that a

¹³³ Witos, Grashchenkov, and Kudriavtsev et al., “Communique,” pp. 1-3.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

¹³⁵ Shneer, *Through Soviet-Jewish Eyes*, p. 157.

genocide of the Jewish people had occurred at Majdanek. Yet this does not mean that the Commission did not perceive that Jews were the most prominent among the victims.

Jewish victims were actually mentioned several times in the Communique. For example, it was written that the list of dead was “constantly augmented by... the names of Jews brought from the Ghettos set up the by Gestapo in Poland and different towns in Western Europe” and that Majdanek and other extermination camps “were also places for the complete extermination of the Jewish population.”¹³⁶ Towards the end of the Communique it was written that the camp contained “a vast number of Jews.”¹³⁷ So one cannot argue that Jewish suffering was ignored. Yet to this it is appropriate to consider the following excerpt:

“Thus, the evidence of numerous eyewitnesses, the findings of the Committee of Medical Experts and the Committee of Technical and Chemical Experts prove that for nearly three years the Hitler butchers in the Majdanek Camp systematically carried out the wholesale asphyxiation with the aid of gases of hundreds of thousands of totally innocent people, including aged people, women and children.”¹³⁸

Here it is seen that the Commission did, indeed, heavily rely on eye-witness testimony. They even relied on it to attest to the fact that Jews were among those killed at Majdanek. Yet when citing specific examples of atrocity in the Communique based on the eye-witness interviews, the Commission kept the references to Russian/Soviet POWs and Poles but changed Jews to “persons.”

For example, in the Communique it was written that “On November 3, 1943, eighteen thousand four hundred persons were shot in the camp” and that “Stanisławski, a Polish prisoner

¹³⁶ Witos, Grashchenkov, and Kudriavtsev et al., “Communique,” pp. 3, 9.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

who worked in the camp office, stated the following concerning the shooting on November 3, 1943: ... “[there was] a special extermination of eighteen thousand persons.”¹³⁹ Yet this is not what Stanisławski said. In the actual testimony, when asked “what can you say about 3 November 1943” he replied, “I saw a special cordon around Majdanek, surrounded by SS-men and gendearms. These brigades shot Jews in the fifth field... the file counted around 20,000.”¹⁴⁰ The Commission actually received the answer of 18,000 people from Grashchenkov’s interview of SS-Obersturmführer Ternes (whose testimony was presented in the previous section) who answered Grashchenkov’s query as to why Jews were particularly targeted by the Nazis by stating that Jewish destruction was called for in the program of the Nazi party. At that point, Grashchenkov had been made aware several times that this particular shooting was of Jews.¹⁴¹ Yet he preserved group particularity in other specific occurrences of atrocity. The Communique maintained the reference to a group of 5,000 Russian POWs who were shot in winter 1942.¹⁴²

In another example, the Communique mentioned that “[t]he material proof which the Commission discovered in the camp – the store of boots and shoes which had belonged to those who were shot or who died, the store of miscellaneous belongings of the prisoners, and also the Gestapo store in Chopin Street in Lublin – indicates that all the clothing and other belongings of the prisoners were carefully sorted and shipped to Germany” and that these belonged to “Soviet citizens, Poles, Frenchmen, Czechs, Belgians, Netherlanders, Greeks, Croatians, Italians, Norwegians, Danes and also Jews from different countries.”¹⁴³ Yet such phrasing equalizes what

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 11.

¹⁴⁰ Questioning of the Polish prisoner Andrzej Stanisławski by Procurator Zuzia Balcerzak at the general meeting to interview former prisoners and SS officers at Majdanek, recorded by Piotr Sobolewski, *protokol* no. 4 of the Polish-Soviet Extraordinary Commission, p. 8, Lublin, August 24, 1944, APMM, z. XXV, j.a. 4, l. 42.

¹⁴¹ See *ibid.*: Questioning of SS-officer Shollen by Witos, (p. 2), l. 36 – “I know that on 3 November 1943 between 18-20,000 Jews were destroyed” and Questioning of the Polish chemist Tadeusz Budzyń by Professor Szylling-Syngalewicz, (p. 3), l. 37 – “I know that on November 3, 1943, a shooting of Jews happened.”

¹⁴² Witos, Grashchenkov, and Kudriavtsev et al., “Communique,” p. 8.

¹⁴³ Ibid., pp. 22-23.

were actually disparate proportions of property belonging to Jews and non-Jews. This was made evident by the testimony of SS-officer Shollen who was the clothing manager of the warehouse at 27 Chopin Street. Witos asked him specifically “from where did all the shoes, and also the clothing from women and children, that were found in the camp come?” to which Shollen replied, “These things belonged to the murdered, primarily Jews.”¹⁴⁴ He then attested that the corpses were then burned in the crematoria.

Another example shows how a group of incoming Jews were framed as intellectuals. As mentioned earlier, Sommerstein had wanted to highlight Budzyń’s testimony about the group of 1,200 Jews from Athens. In the Communique, the Commission relied upon Budzyń’s testimony to illustrate other means of death at Majdanek. Yet they spoke only of “a large group of professors, physicians, engineers and other specialists, numbering one thousand two hundred in all, who came from Greece” whom the Germans beat to death or worked to exhaustion through humiliating means.¹⁴⁵ Even though Sommerstein was unsuccessful in inserting the specifically Jewish reference in the Communique, he submitted the information to a Jewish international press in which it was stated “[t]he mystery surrounding the fate of several thousand Jews deported from Athens by the Germans last year has been partially solved with the disclosure here that 1,200 of the deportees were executed at the Majdanek camp... The 1,200 Greek Jews were not gassed, burned or buried alive, as were most of the Majdanek victim[s]. Survivors report that they were systematically beaten to death over a period of several weeks.”¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ Questioning of SS-officer Shollen by Witos at the general meeting to interview former prisoners and SS officers at Majdanek, recorded by Piotr Sobolewski, *protokol* no. 4 of the Polish-Soviet Extraordinary Commission, p. 3, Lublin, August 24, 1944, APMM, z. XXV, j.a. 4, l. 37.

¹⁴⁵ Witos, Grashchenkov, and Kudriavtsev et al., “Communique,” pp. 6-7.

¹⁴⁶ “Mystery of Fate of Athens Jews Solved with Discovery They [were] Executed at Majdanek,” *JTA*, September 5, 1944, (September 4, Lublin), <http://www.jta.org/1944/09/05/archive/mystery-of-fate-of-athens-jews-solved-with-discovery-they-executed-at-majdanek> (accessed April 8, 2015).

Budzyń, Shollen, Stanisławski, and Ternes all attested at times to the particular suffering of Poles and/or Soviet or Russian POWs.¹⁴⁷ In the Communique these references were not obscured as were their references to Jewish suffering. The Commission also relied on the testimony of eye-witness civilians who lived close to the Krembecki woods on the outskirts of Lublin. Although Jewish suffering was not erased, Poles were given more emotive descriptions. For example, it was written that “Heinz [Hans] Stalbe stated that he saw the chief of the crematorium, Oberscharführer Munsfeld, tie a Polish woman hand and foot and throw her alive into the furnace.”¹⁴⁸ It also stated that a resident from the outskirt of Dziesiąta said that “[f]rom March to July 22 the Gestapo brought up a large number of Polish inhabitants... [who] were taken to the crematorium.” This was followed by remarks from “Niedzialek, who witnessed these wholesale shootings of Polish inhabitants.” Then it was mentioned how SS men brought a trucks “all loaded exclusively with [the bodies of] Polish children [which] were entirely naked. All the bodies of these children were piled up in stacks in the woods and burnt.”¹⁴⁹

The Communique relied extensively on the testimony of Stanisławski. There was an important moment when in reply to the question “What can you determine about the number of prisoners killed?” he answered that “[t]he largest number exterminated were Jews.”¹⁵⁰ That Majdanek was a place of predominately Jewish suffering is not perceivable from the Communique even though it was referred to as such in several initial Red Army *spravki* the Commission used in

¹⁴⁷ Questioning of SS-officer Shollen by Witos at the general meeting to interview former prisoners and SS officers at Majdanek, recorded by Piotr Sobolewski, *protokol* no. 4 of the Polish-Soviet Extraordinary Commission, p. 2, Lublin, August 24, 1944, APMM, z. XXV, j.a. 4, l. 36; see also Questioning of the Polish chemist Tadeusz Budzyń by Professor Szylling-Syngalewicz, (pp. 3-4), l. 37-38; Questioning of the German political prisoner Hans Shtalbe by Dr. Kudriavtsev, (p. 7), l. 41; Questioning of the Polish prisoner Andrzej Stanisławski by Procurator Zuzia Balcerzak, (p. 8), l. 42; Questioning of the Polish prisoner Jan Niedzialek by Procurator Zuzia Balcerzak, (p. 9), l. 45; Questioning of Senior SS-Obersturmführer Ternes by Professor N. I. Grashchenkov (pp. 10-11), l. 46-47.

¹⁴⁸ Witos, Grashchenkov, and Kudriavtsev et al., “Communique,” p. 8.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁵⁰ Questioning of the Polish prisoner Andrzej Stanisławski by Procurator Zuzia Balcerzak at the general meeting to interview former prisoners and SS officers at Majdanek, recorded by Piotr Sobolewski, *protokol* no. 4 of the Polish-Soviet Extraordinary Commission, p. 9, Lublin, August 24, 1944, APMM, z. XXV, j.a. 4, l. 43.

the beginning of the investigation and throughout the questionings of eye witnesses which its members had conducted on their own. Instead, Majdanek was presented as a place where the Germans could “exterminate the progressive and active part of the Slavonic peoples... [in] enslaved Poland” where sometimes “the complete extermination of the Jewish population” took place.¹⁵¹

Ultimately, during this time of flux in the immediate period of liberation of Poland, Grashchenkov, Witos, and Sommerstein represented the triangle of Soviet, Polish, and Jewish interests being carefully negotiated during this time, with the hierarchy of priorities in that order. Photographs and select textual commentary showed that the Soviets sometimes were compelled to concede some of their wartime norms for reporting German atrocity to accommodate Polish desires for Majdanek to be seen as a tragedy for “enslaved Poland.” In the Communique, these concessions were minimal compared to those given to Poles actually at home in Lublin. The Communique was essentially a Soviet text with a [facile and legitimizing] Polish signature. As it was being prepared for an international – especially Soviet – audience, it is not surprising that Jewish suffering was downplayed or that Polish suffering was not overwhelmingly highlighted. But by focusing on the Communique and the debate over how to structure the Communique instead of other reports on Majdanek, valuable insight is gained into how the Jewish question was being negotiated among those who would be the actors in a new Poland that was undergoing a transition to communist rule at a time when it was still uncertain whether that transition would actually succeed.

¹⁵¹ Witos, Grashchenkov, and Kudriavtsev et al., “Communique,” p. 9.

CONCLUSION

There were several moments during the investigation in which Soviet members of the Commission were explicitly made aware of the predominately Jewish number of victims at Majdanek in their questionings (in the *protokoly*) of the remaining prisoners and SS officers who had not been included in the final transports to the camps in the west. Jewish specificity is also indicated in various *spravki* (inquiries) and *akty* (reports). The Jewish ethnic distinction among victims noted in such documents was not always transferred to the Soviet press reports, but it also was not completely omitted – an already well-known assessment. Of particular significance to this study is how this related to early post-war Soviet interactions with the peoples and governments under its occupation. It can be assumed for the time being that Soviet representations of the Jewish fate during WWII and what is now referred to as the Holocaust were nearly always the result of individual debates under various singular circumstances in an atmosphere of shifting Soviet prerogatives and wartime policy goals. This study presents itself as one such case.

As Jeremy Hicks, David Shneer, and Karel Berkhoff have shown, the Soviet central press was saturated with reports and photographs – emotive and documentary – of Majdanek. Their work tends to center primarily on analyses of films, photos, and reports after they have already been made public, reviewing their aesthetic and ideological qualities. They have made excellent points for why the Soviets chose to represent Majdanek the way they did. Yet, an argument they do not raise is that Majdanek would not have been represented nearly to the extent it was if it had been discovered in Belarus or Latvia, for example – territories that were already fully annexed into the Soviet Union. Neither would it have been depicted so frequently and with such care if it had been found in Hungary or Czechoslovakia, for example – territories that eventually came under Soviet influence much later but that did not have such a cohesive ethnic and national front – with an army

large enough to legitimately contest the Soviets.¹⁵² Even if Poles were divided between the London and Lublin governments, there was still a strong national component, largely based on religion, which served as a barrier to a smooth communist transition. Some of the leading Polish figures in the PKWN were reluctant communists. Of these members, the focus here has been on Andrzej Witos and Emil Sommerstein because they represented the two opposing sides from a Polish perspective – i.e., ethnic Poles and Jews – but they also represented two competing yet intertwined factions that were problematic from a Soviet perspective. Professor N. I. Grashchenkov – himself a national minority as a Belarussian – represented the intermediary figure who, on the one hand, essentially had the highest authority on the Commission but, on the other, had to negotiate with both Sommerstein and Witos and could not actually proceed with his plan for the Communiqué without the latter’s approval. This thesis has been largely a story of how the Jewish aspect was negotiated in framing Majdanek for the press. But through that, I have tried to show how it was a part of broader flux in early Polish-Soviet relations in which the position on Jews was still being formed.

As Karel Berkhoff has written, the larger Soviet body of the Extraordinary State Commission to Investigate Crimes (institutionally separate from the Commission at Majdanek) throughout the war did not even publish all of the reports they created because the ultimate goal was not to expose crimes, necessarily, but to “legitimize the documentary materials collected in order to later use them for the ideological and political struggle of postwar Europe.”¹⁵³ However, many of the same patterns for Red Army reporting applied to the Majdanek Commission. Other than the Commission’s own reports, documents procured and created by the Red Army constituted

¹⁵² Ramet, *Religion and Nationalism in Soviet and East European Politics*, p. 21. See also Prusin, *The Lands Between*, 209-210.

¹⁵³ Berkhoff, *Motherland in Danger*, p. 121.

the bulk of their evidence. For the Poles it was important that a Commission be established to investigate Majdanek – it was, after all, at their initiation. Making a great and visible effort to focus on the camp – regardless of how questions of either Jewish or Polish specificity were dealt with – would lend the Soviets and communist rule in Poland credibility. This idea in itself – that victory over Nazism would legitimate Soviet rule over its occupied territories – is not novel. However, Jeffrey Burds has shone new insight on early Cold War developments that are relevant to this study. He writes that “recently discovered information reveals that Soviet intelligence had intercepted and captured German reports regarding British support of anti-Soviet partisans in Poland and Ukraine” in 1944 and in western Ukraine from mid-1943.¹⁵⁴ But he also writes that the higher authorities in Moscow dismissed such reports, including one in which a senior NKVD officer said that “within the OUN [Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists], there developed a sense that England and America were most interested not in a Soviet victory over Germany, but rather in the combined weakening of both nations.”¹⁵⁵

Burds goes on to describe that while elites might have rejected such claims, “minorities could feed off of misinformation” and that in the borderlands, these “rumors or not” posed a serious threat to Soviet control.¹⁵⁶ In the Lublin region during this unique window of flux the Polish underground army was still actively fighting the Soviets. The Soviets had set up an NKVD camp in one of Majdanek’s fields in which captured soldiers from the AK were placed, reflecting this concern. By focusing on proving German guilt at Majdanek, the Soviets and members of the PKWN could be seen as a moral authority cooperating with the Allies. In this thesis it has been shown how the main goal of the Commission was to prepare materials to be used in post-war trials

¹⁵⁴ Jeffrey Burds, “The Early Cold War in Soviet West Ukraine, 1944-1948,” *The Carl Beck Papers in Russian & East European Studies*, no. 1505 (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburg, 2001), pp. 19, 22.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25.

that would legally prove German guilt. The documents also indicated that the Commission members felt they were doing something that the Western Allies were not – recognizing the specific threat of Nazism to Slavic peoples. Questions of ethnic specificity came up only as secondary – albeit important – issues. This shows an important perspective on how local actors were negotiating the Jewish question in a newly forming government. But the goal was to immediately and unquestionably prove that the Germans had committed heinous crimes at Majdanek. Highlighting Majdanek would appeal to the West and quickly legitimize Soviet rule during this immediate period of flux. Establishing this legitimacy might prove more difficult later (when the West and Soviet Union were no longer likely to be “allies”), so it was important to secure a communist transition and suppress nationalist resistance first.

The quote from Berkhoff mentioned above is particularly illuminating in this light, but where he sees the downplaying of Jewish suffering and focus on the need to “legitimize the documentary materials” in the main context of a revival of Soviet antisemitism (which was certainly developing), in the case of Majdanek it seems that the Soviet members of the Commission acted more out of a need to negotiate domestic antisemitism in the Polish and Ukrainian territories rather than simply exercising their own antisemitic feelings. This is not meant to be an exercise in proving competing antisemitism but rather to show that antisemitic results are not always the fruit of antisemitic intent.

If the trend after 1943, as Karel Berkhoff has argued, was to actually refer more often to Jewish victims as such at atrocity sites outside of the Soviet Union, it is odd that this was not the case at Majdanek, especially as unique Jewish suffering was so many times made explicitly aware to everyone on the Committee. But just like at home in the Soviet Union, in Poland it would have been equally disruptive for the war effort if the Poles thought of it as a “war for the Jews” or of

the Soviets as liberators “of Jews.” Ultimately, focusing on Majdanek – and highlighting Polish suffering when possible – would discourage nationalist resistance in both the Soviet west and Polish east.

It is worth reemphasizing Shneer’s observation that Majdanek was “by far the least Jewish of any extermination camp,” which was true.¹⁵⁷ Yet, the Commission explicitly de-emphasized its overwhelming Jewish nature. This was so easily facilitated because only the eye-witness testimonies explicitly indicated Jewish specificity in the Commission’s investigation. While an extensive photographic record was published so that the world would see (in order to *believe*) the crimes at Majdanek, it was for simply proving German guilt.¹⁵⁸ Although the stated goal was to emphasize the camp’s international character, in the Communique the Commission also referenced eye-witnesses several times to denote specific crimes against Poles or Russian and Soviet POWs.¹⁵⁹ Yet when those same individuals attested to specifically Jewish victims, the Commission changed the reference from “Jews” to “persons.”¹⁶⁰ The Commission aimed to universalize all suffering – but the suffering of some groups was more universalized than others. Amir Weiner has shown that the NKVD in Ukraine meticulously documented anti-Jewish massacres and punished the perpetrators but that the Soviet authorities “made it clear that the surviving Jews were subject to the same policies as the rest of the population, no matter how traumatic their experience had been.”¹⁶¹ When the Soviets moved into Polish territory, the logic was the same.

¹⁵⁷ Shneer, *Through Soviet-Jewish Eyes*, p. 157.

¹⁵⁸ For more on this, see David Shneer, “Is Seeing Believing?: Photographs, Eyewitness Testimony, and Evidence of the Holocaust,” *East European Jewish Affairs*, 45, no. 1 (January 2015): pp. 65-78.

¹⁵⁹ “Kommunikatsiia Pol’sko-Sovetskoi Chrezvychainoi Komissii po rassledovaniiu zlodeianii nemtsev, sovershennykh v lagere unichtozheniia na Maidaneke v gorode Liublin,” *Pravda*, September 16, 1944, p. 2.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.* – “3 noiabria 1943 goda v lagere bylo rasstreliano 18,400 *chelovek*” – but all the witnesses whom they cite in this Communique referred to Jews on this date.

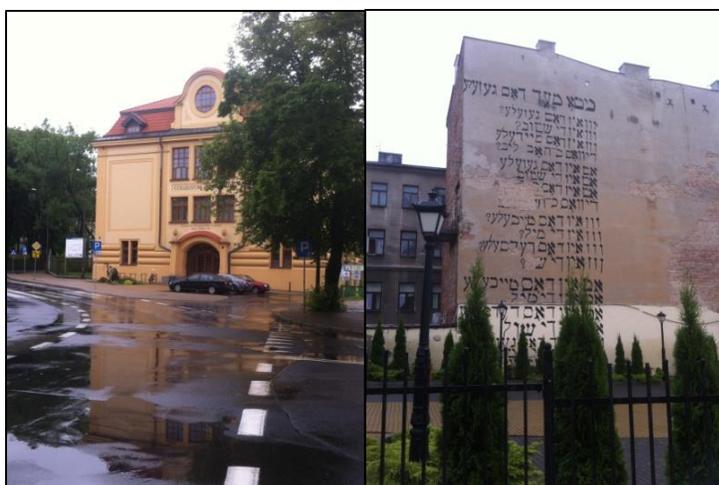
¹⁶¹ Amir Weiner, *Making Sense of War: The Second World War and the Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 211-212.

One of the frequent problems cited in studies of Polish memory of the Holocaust is that the Soviet period was a time when memory of Nazi crimes against Poland was suppressed. This was not entirely true. Holocaust memory – for Jews and Poles – was allowed more room in communist Poland than in the Soviet Union itself. Countless studies address Holocaust memory in Poland, but hopefully this thesis has provided a new perspective on early events that formed its development. It is also the goal that such a perspective can be considered useful not just for Holocaust studies but for Soviet and Eastern European history more broadly – because all are ultimately intertwined. But it is just one of many perspectives to share. Although larger political goals have been discussed, the greatest recurring theme has been the question of negotiating Jewish specificity at Majdanek. The Soviet and Polish confrontation with Majdanek was one of ambiguity. On the one hand, the war did not significantly change Polish perceptions of Jews – if anything, it exacerbated tensions.¹⁶² On the other, during the early days of communist rule there was no clear Soviet political stance on anything, in general, but especially on the Jewish question.

¹⁶² Irwin-Zarecka, “Poland’s Jews – A Memory Void,” in *Neutralizing Memory*, p. 46.

EPILOGUE: APPREHENDING THE LOSS OF LUBLIN'S JEWS

Walking along Lublin's main street heading towards the old town, if one looks to the left where Wieniawska Street crosses with Krakowskie Przedmieście one will see a small orange-yellow building that is now home to the law department of the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin. In 1942 it served as the headquarters for Operation Reinhard, the euphemism for Hitler's Final Solution to the Jewish Question. From here, the SS officers in Lublin planned the schedules for



the departing trains taking the region's Jews to various concentration and death camps in Poland. There is nothing to indicate to passerby that this building ever served such a purpose. Also visible from the main street is the façade of a tall building next to the

Photos by author.

former Operation Reinhard headquarters on which is written in solemn Yiddish verse the words: "Here there once lived a Jewish girl in a house that is no more, on streets that are no more."¹⁶³

From the main street, the imagery of these two buildings near each other highlights the ambivalent nature of Jewish memory in Poland today. There is certainly a concentrated effort to remember the Jews of Lublin who died in the Holocaust, but a long legacy of pre and post-war antisemitism in its various manifestations have complicated that memory effort. In 1939 Lublin

¹⁶³ This is a summary of the whole verse, of which is available in Polish, "Blog Lublin: Lublin z subiektywnej perspektywy," http://bloglublin.blogspot.com/2011_06_01_archive.html?m=1 (accessed on June 5, 2015).

had 45,000 Jews. Today there remain 20 Jewish individuals in Lublin.¹⁶⁴ As devastating as the Holocaust was to Poland's Jewish population, it is inaccurate to believe that this number reflects the effect only of the Holocaust on the Jewish population of Lublin. The loss of Lublin's Jewish population occurred in three stages: the Holocaust (primary), the aftermath of the Kielce Pogrom in 1946 (second major decrease), and finally the Anti-Zionist Campaign of 1968 (when the remaining Jews left Lublin). The Anti-Zionist-cum-Antisemitic Campaign in Poland provoked further Jewish emigration, and the campaign's legacy remains in Lublin today, although its impact was not as severe as it was in Warsaw and other cities. This was because of the cities that had sustained a Jewish population after the war, Lublin's was one of the smallest.

In 1946, the number of Jews in Lublin was about 2,300.¹⁶⁵ This was a mixture of Jews who were in camps but had lived in Lublin before the war and those from other cities or even countries resurfacing from hiding or returning from the Soviet Union who then settled in Lublin upon the liberation of Majdanek. Most of Lublin's pre-war Jewish population was sent to the death camps of Bełżec, Treblinka, and Sobibor and, therefore, did not survive. Yet many surviving Jews from the camps liberated in 1944 and 1945 made their way to Lublin. Emil Sommerstein hoped it would become a new center for Jewish life due to Warsaw's destruction and the fact that the region was liberated earlier than other areas of Poland. Immediately after the war, there were about 5,000 Jews in Lublin, due to Sommerstein's repatriation efforts. But by 1946 many of those Jews had moved to Warsaw and took their new institutions with them.¹⁶⁶ Any remaining hopes that Lublin would indeed become a new center for Jewish life were destroyed after the infamous Kielce Pogrom of

¹⁶⁴ There may be as many as 40 Jews if the estimate includes those who are unaffiliated with the Jewish community. Rebecca Weiner, "Virtual Jewish World: Lublin Poland," *Jewish Virtual Library*, 2014, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/vjw/Lublin.html#con> (accessed June 5, 2015).

¹⁶⁵ Adam Kopciowski, "The History of the Jews of Lublin," Foundation for the Protection of Lublin Jewish Cemeteries, 2010, available from <http://www.kirkuty-lublin.pl/en/historia-zydow-lubelskich.html?start=2> (accessed June 5, 2015).

¹⁶⁶ Weiner, "Virtual Jewish World," <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/vjw/Lublin.html#con> (accessed June 5, 2015).

1946. The pogrom caused a mass exodus of Jews from all throughout Poland, and in the same year the Jewish population in Lublin decreased by 57% to just about 1,000 Jews.¹⁶⁷ Afterwards, the Jewish population continued to decrease, and in 1968 there were just 450 Jews in Lublin.¹⁶⁸

By 1968, most Jewish citizens, especially young people, were highly assimilated into Polish society and considered themselves first as Polish citizens. Yet Polish society continued its legacy of viewing Jews as the ‘other’ and in troublesome times continued to see them as scapegoats. NN Theatre (the local Jewish historical memory organization) has for the last ten years been interviewing those who emigrated from Lublin in the 1960s. Michał Hochman pointed out that scapegoating Jews was nearly ridiculous in Lublin because the Jewish community was so small.¹⁶⁹ Even though Poland’s Jewish population was continuously decreasing, Jewish institutions were more active and visible than other ethnic minorities’ institutions. In order to rebuild their lives after the Holocaust and in response to Sommerstein’s efforts, foreign organizations (Jewish and non-Jewish) gave substantially to Jewish institutions in Poland. Therefore, Jewish institutions received a large amount of foreign assistance that other ethnic groups did not have, which further exacerbated tensions.¹⁷⁰

As Jews began to emigrate from Lublin, they were often required to renounce their Polish citizenship. Hochman recalled how he told his colleagues, “See. A week ago, I was a Polish citizen and now I’m not.”¹⁷¹ Miriam Kuperman recalled how Jews were issued their travel documents with utmost efficiency during a time when party bureaucracy rendered travel abroad for ordinary

¹⁶⁷ Kopciowski, “The History of the Jews of Lublin,” <http://www.kirkuty-lublin.pl/en/historia-zydowlubelskich.html?start=2> (accessed June 5, 2015).

¹⁶⁸ Łukasz Kijek, ed., “Marzec ‘68 – wspomnienia lubelskich emigrantów,” Ośrodek Brama Grodzka – Teatr NN, *Leksykon Lublin*, <http://teatrnn.pl/leksykon/node/4017/marzec> (accessed June 5, 2015).

¹⁶⁹ Testimony of Michał Hochman in *ibid.*

¹⁷⁰ Dariusz Stola, “Anti-Zionism as a Multipurpose Policy Instrument: The Anti-Zionist Campaign in Poland, 1967–1968 Instrument,” *Journal of Israeli History: Politics, Society, Culture* 25, no. 1 (2006): p. 180.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

citizens nearly impossible.¹⁷² When she left she knew that she would never return to Lublin, as did those Jews who left Lublin at any time after the war.

In the 1960s when historians began interpreting the Nazi destruction of Jews as genocide and referring to it as ‘the Holocaust’, Poles saw the Holocaust as a greater Polish genocide – the one context in which Jews counted as Polish citizens.¹⁷³ At Majdanek Jewish victimhood was framed first as universal victimhood among nationalities and then as Polish victimhood when the circumstance allowed. Twenty years later, the genocide of Jews was framed as the genocide of Poles more broadly. I tried to show in my thesis one perspective on the context for how such developments occurred.

What remains of Jewish life today in Lublin is only a minuscule fraction of what was once one of the largest concentrations of European Jewry. The Holocaust destroyed nearly all of Lublin’s original Jews, but a fairly substantial number of Jews lived in the city after the war. The Jewish Community in Lublin today is very small, and there are only two institutions that function as centers for Jewish religious life, both owned and subsidized by the Jewish community of Warsaw. The Chachmei Lublin Yeshiva building at 85 Lubartowska Street survived WWII and currently houses a small synagogue, medical academy, and a hotel. There is the small Chevra Nosim synagogue with a prayer room on the second floor of a building at 10 Lubartowska Street. The remaining Jews celebrate all the Jewish holidays in these places and maintain their traditions. Post-war antisemitism and the events of ’68 led not only to further absence of Jewish presence but also of the history and memory of what was once a thriving Jewish center. In 2006 the president

¹⁷² Testimony of Mirium Kuperman in “Marzec ’68 – wspomnienia lubelskich emigrantów,” Ośrodek Brama Grodzka –Teatr NN, Leksykon Lublin, <http://teatrnn.pl/leksykon/node/4017/marzec> (accessed June 5, 2015).

¹⁷³ Irwin-Zarecka, *Neutralizing Memory*, p. 62.

of the Organization for Lubliners in Israel, Joseph Dakar, was awarded the honorary title of Ambassador of Lublin – but behind this is the fact that these Lubliners are in Israel and *not* in Lublin.

In the early 1990s a theater group moved into a building on Szeroka Street at the Grodzka Gate which was the entrance to Lublin's former Jewish quarter. The theater organization did not realize the history of the building they were inhabiting. Neither did the rest of Lublin's inhabitants. When the organization – now called NN Theatre – realized that just outside the gate was a hidden Jewish past and buried memory, they transformed the space into a museum and cultural center to “uncover the memory of the past while mourning the victims of the Holocaust.” Now the center organizes several community artistic and cultural projects that promote the visibility of Jewish memory and history of Lublin's Jewish past, such as marked Jewish heritage trails, evening poetry walks following the steps of Lublin's leading Jewish poet killed in the war, educational workshops, and community art displays, as well as maintaining an active media presence.

Exiting the theatre, an immediate glance to the right reveals a view of Lublin's former Jewish quarter. Now there is a huge parking lot and outdoor concert space on one end and a manicured park on the other. What remains of the former district is an eternally burning street lamp, indicating what was once a thriving area of Jewish life.

One of NN Theatre's most recent projects is a display of enlarged images of glass plate frames of photographs taken of several hundred of Lublin's pre-war Jewish population. These frames were found in a box at house number 4 on Rynek Square, close to the Jewish restaurant. Together NN Theatre and local authorities planned to enlarge images of the plates and display them in various spots around the Old Town. It can be ascertained that most of the Jews in the frames died in the Holocaust. This project demonstrates the ambivalent nature of memory in

Lublin. There is nothing to indicate to the public that these people were Jewish, but it provokes thought about the mystery of the area and the history it contains. The monuments to the Jewish victims of the Holocaust are few in number, small, and easily overlooked, but this project attempts to evoke the loss of the Jewish people in a more emotive, albeit nuanced way – simultaneously immediate and distant.



Photos by author.

Unfortunately, antisemitism remains in Lublin, despite the efforts of organizations to overcome it and the great strides Poland has made, in general, in combating its legacy. One should not view Polish antisemitism as monolithic, however. There is a need to recognize that Polish antisemitism has existed in various forms and degrees in both its pre- and post-war manifestations.

In 2012 President of Lublin Krzysztof Żuk gave a public speech in which he condemned antisemitism saying, “There is no place for antisemitism in Lublin,” speaking to its visibility.¹⁷⁴ In an example, students from a local school had volunteered to create a unique mural commemorating Majdanek, but in 2013 the exhibition was destroyed by an antisemitic vandal.¹⁷⁵ The worst

¹⁷⁴ “Prezydent: “W Lublinie nie ma miejsca na antysemityzm”” *Wyborcza Lublin*, May 22, 2012, http://lublin.gazeta.pl/lublin/1,48724,11778066,Prezydent___W_Lublinie_nie_ma_miejsca_na_antysemityzm_.html (accessed December 20, 2014).

¹⁷⁵ “Antysemita zatrzymany. Zdewastował wyjątkowy mural,” *Wyborcza Lublin*, September 12, 2013, http://lublin.gazeta.pl/lublin/1,48724,14590885,Antysemita_zatrzymany__Zdewastowal_wyjatkowy_mural.html (accessed June 5, 2015).

instance of revived antisemitism in Lublin was in January 2014 when a worker at the State Museum at Majdanek was arrested for disseminating antisemitic posters around Lublin. The poster displayed slurs such as “Syjoniści won z Lublina!” (Zionists leave Lublin!) and “Nasze ulice! Nasze kamienice!” (Our streets! Our houses!).¹⁷⁶ Another poster displayed a Soviet hammer and sickle, Jewish Star of David, and a crude image of homosexuality, all crossed out to indicate “forbidden.”

The Jewish nature of Majdanek has since been recognized in Poland, and the camp grounds are well-preserved and remain unchanged except for general maintenance and upkeep. But even in Lublin preparations for the commemoration of the 70th Anniversary of the liberation of Majdanek were overshadowed by those for the 70th Anniversary of the Warsaw Uprising of 1944 – not to be confused with the Warsaw Ghetto uprising of 1943. The Warsaw Uprising which lasted from August to October of 1944 represents in the minds of ordinary Poles a symbol for national suffering during the war, while Majdanek is increasingly interpreted as uniquely ‘Jewish’.

Majdanek used to lie two miles outside of Lublin, but now it has essentially become part of the cityscape. Although it remains in the suburbs, new houses have been built around the perimeter of the camp. After passing Majdanek on foot or by bus one will encounter communist era factories, as well as new stores, centers, and parks. There is a pedestrian and bicycle path that cuts through the field separating the camp grounds and the memorial monument, and the city’s east campus of the Catholic University is directly across the street from the entrance to Majdanek’s grounds. This, of course, renders Majdanek visible to the everyday Pole, but one cannot help but

¹⁷⁶ “Pracownik Muzeum na Majdanku aresztowany za antysemickie plakaty,” *Wyborcza Lublin*, January 24, 2014, http://m.wyborcza.pl/wyborcza/1,105226,15334221,Pracownik_Muzeum_na_Majdanku_aresztowany_za_antysemickie.html?order=najnowsze (accessed June 5, 2015).

notice that it reflects the subsuming of Majdanek into the greater Polish landscape, both literally and figuratively.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Newspapers

I use the Soviet central paper *Pravda* from September 1944. I also, to a much lesser extent, review the Polish papers *Nowe Życie* and the underground newspaper *Rzeczpospolita*. I have photos of some originals obtained from the State Museum of Majdanek, but I really rely on full-text digital versions of the papers available in the Eastview Database. I also rely heavily on the *Jewish Telegraphic Agency* from July to October, 1944, retrieved from <http://www.jta.org>.

Archival Sources

All of the documents I use concerning the Commission's investigation are photographed copies I obtained from the following funds in the Archive of the State Museum at Majdanek (Archiwum Państwowego Muzeum na Majdanku [APMM]):

Zespół (fund) VII (Pamiętniki, relacje, ankiety byłych więźniów [Former prisoners' diaries, accounts, and questionnaires]). Kolekcja (collection) 135 (Protokoły przesłuchań OKBZN [Interrogation reports of the District Commission for the Prosecution of Nazi Crimes in Poland]).

Z. XXV (Polsko-Sowiecka Komisja Nadzwyczajna ds. Zbadania Zbrodni na Terenie b. Obozu Koncentracyjnego na Majdanku, 1944 [Polish-Soviet Extraordinary Commission to Examine Crimes in the Area of the Concentration Camp at Majdanek, 1944]). Jednostka (j.a.) (unit) 4 and 5.

Some documents are copies from documents sent to the TsAMO SSSR (*Tsentral'nyi Arkhiv Ministerstva Oborony Soiuzu Sovetskikh Sotsialisticheskikh Respublik* [Central Archive of the Ministry of Defense of the Soviet Union]) in Moscow which are also in the archives of the State Museum of Majdanek. Others are original Russian documents or those which were translated into Russian from Polish and are housed primarily in the State Museum of Majdanek. All translations from the Russian into English are mine.

Primary Sources

- Kielboń, Janina and Edward Balawejder. Eds. *Państwowe Muzeum na Majdanku w latach 1944-1947: Wybór dokumentów*. Lublin: Wydawnictwo, 2004.
- Khrushchev, Nikita. *Commisar, 1918-1945*. Edited and translated by Sergei Khrushchev. Vol. 1 of *Memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 2004.
- Leszczyńska, Zofia. *Kronika Obozu na Majdanku*. Lublin: Wydawnictwo Lubelskie, 1980.
- Lotnik, Waldemar. *Nine Lives: Ethnic Conflict in the Polish-Ukrainian Borderlands*. Edited by Julian Pierce. London: Serif, 1999.

- Polonsky, Antony. Ed. *The Great Powers and the Polish Question, 1941-45: A Documentary Study in Cold War Origins*. London: The London School of Economics and Political Science, 1976.
- Sikorski Institute, the. Ed. *Documents on Polish-Soviet Relations 1943-1945*, vol. 2 of *Documents of Polish-Soviet Relations 1939-1945*. Translated by T. Komarnicki. London: Heinemann, 1967.
- Sverdlov, F. D. *Dokumenty Obviniaiat: Kholokost: svidetel'stva Krasnoi Armii*. Moscow: Rossiiskaia Biblioteka Kholokosta, 1996.
- Witos, Andrzej. *Wszystko, co niosło życie: wspomnienia*. Compiled by Czesław Brzoza. Wojnicz: Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Ziemi Wojnickiej, 1998.
- Witos, Andrzej, Professor N. I. Grashchenkov, and Dr. D. I. Kudriavtsev et al. "Communique of the Polish-Soviet Extraordinary Commission for Investigating the Crimes Committed by the Germans in the Majdanek Concentration Camp in Lublin." Lublin: Information and Propaganda Department of the Polish Committee of National Liberation, 1944.
- Zabludovsky, David. "Horrors, Death and Destruction (Experiences of a Holocaust Survivor)." (Hebrew). Translated by Ziva Rosenhand. Available online at www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/zabludow/zab143.html#Page149. Accessed April 4, 2015.
- Zuckerman, Yitzhak. *A Surplus of Memory: Chronicle of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising*. (Hebrew). Translated and edited by Barbara Harshav. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993.

Secondary Sources

- Berkhoff, Karel. *Motherland in Danger: Soviet Propaganda during World War II*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012.
- Blatman, Daniel. "The Encounter between Jews and Poles in Lublin District after Liberation, 1944-1945." *East European Politics and Societies* 20, no. 4 (2006): pp. 598-621.
- Burds, Jeffrey. "The Early Cold War in Soviet West Ukraine, 1944-1948." *The Carl Beck Papers in Russian & East European Studies*, no. 1505. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 2001.
- Chodakiewicz, Jan Marek. *After the Holocaust: Polish-Jewish Conflict in the Wake of WWII*. Boulder, CO: East European Monographs, 2003.
- Coutouvidis, John and Jaime Reynolds. *Poland, 1939-1947*. The Politics of Liberation Series. Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1986.
- David-Fox, Michael, Peter Holquist, and Alexander M. Martin. *The Holocaust in the East: Local Perpetrators and Soviet Responses*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2014.
- Davies, Norman and Antony Polonsky. Eds. *Jews in Eastern Poland and the USSR, 1939-46*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991.
- Elliot, Robin Gates. "Saddling the Cow: The Collectivization of Agriculture in Poland, 1948-1956." PhD diss., Georgetown University, 2007.
- Gitelman, Zvi. *Bitter Legacy: Confronting the Holocaust in the USSR*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997.
- Graham, Lawrence S. and Maria K. Ciechocinska. Eds. *The Polish Dilemma: Views from Within*. Boulder and London: Westview Press, 1987.
- Hicks, Jeremy. *First Films of the Holocaust: Soviet Cinema and the Genocide of the Jews, 1938-1946*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012.

- Hicks, Jeremy. “‘Soul Destroyers’: Soviet Reporting of Nazi Genocide and its Perpetrators at the Krasnodar and Khar’kov Trials.” *History* 98 (October 2013): pp. 530-547.
- Irwin-Zarecka, Iwona. *Neutralizing Memory: The Jew in Contemporary Poland*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1989.
- Kersten, Krystyna. *The Establishment of Communist Rule in Poland, 1943-1948*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.
- Kochanski, Halik. *The Eagle Unbowed: Poland and the Poles in the Second World War*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012.
- Myant, Martin. *Poland: A Crisis for Socialism*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1982.
- Polonsky, Antony and Boleslaw Drukier. Eds. *The Beginnings of Communist Rule in Poland*. London: Routledge, 1980.
- Prusin, Alexander V. *The Lands Between: Conflict in the East European Borderlands, 1870-1992 (Zones of Violence)*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Prusin, Alexander. “‘Fascist Criminals to the Gallows!’: The Holocaust and Soviet War Crimes Trials, December 1945–February 1946.” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 17, no. 1 (Spring 2003): pp. 1-30.
- Ramet, Pedro. Ed. *Religion and Nationalism in Soviet and East European Politics*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1984.
- Schatz, Jaff. *The Generation: The Rise and Fall of the Jewish Communists of Poland*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991.
- Shneer, David. “Is Seeing Believing?: Photographs, Eyewitness Testimony, and Evidence of the Holocaust.” *East European Jewish Affairs* 45, no. 1 (January 2015): pp. 65-78.
- Shneer, David. *Through Soviet Jewish Eyes: Photography, War, and the Holocaust*. New Brunswick, NJ, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2011.
- Shore, Marci. *Caviar and Ashes: A Warsaw Generation's Life and Death in Marxism, 1918–1968*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006.
- Terlecki, Ryszard. *Miecz i Tarcza Komunizmu: Historia aparatu bezpieczeństwa w Polsce 1944-1990*. Krakow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2007.
- Torańska, Teresa. *‘Oni’: Stalin’s Polish Puppets*. London: Collins and Harvill, 1987.
- Weiner, Amir. *Making Sense of War: The Second World War and the Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.
- Zeltser, Arkadi. “Differing Views among Red Army Personnel about the Nazi Mass Murder of Jews.” *Kritika* 15, no. 3 (Summer 2014): pp. 563-590.
- Zimmerman, Joshua D. Ed. *Contested Memories: Poles and Jews during the Holocaust and its Aftermath*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003.