

Unwilling Pawns: The Role of Jewish Councils in the Occupied Zones of the Russian Soviet Republic during the Second World War

Mark Frenkel, a former elder of the Jewish ghetto, wrote a note during the Soviet investigation of Nazi crimes in the occupied areas of the Soviet Union. This document explained his forced participation in compiling lists of Jews living in the ghetto of the city of Kaluga (former Tula, now Kaluga region), in western Russia:

Regarding the lists of Jews in ghettos during the German occupation of the city of Kaluga, I want to inform you that on November 27, 1941, by order of the former city government, I was asked to compile a list of Jews in the ghetto as of November 28, 1941. I made the list myself and titled it: “A list of residents of the Jewish settlement,” and I signed it as: “the Elder of the Jewish settlement.” For these descriptions, the chief of the police [member of the German local authorities] whipped me on my head twice, tore up the list, and ordered me to compile another [list], and title it “A nominal list of the Zhyd settlement,” and sign it as: “the Elder of the Zhyd settlement.”¹

Frenkel wrote this no earlier than December 30, 1941, after Kaluga, which was occupied for two and a half months, was liberated by the Red Army. A large proportion of the ghetto inmates in Kaluga survived, indicating that the Red Army intervened before the German forces could organize

1 Explanatory note of Mark Frenkel, the former elder of the Jewish ghetto in Kaluga, on the results of compiling the lists of Jews, State archive of Kaluga region (GAKO), f. R-975, op. 1, d. 2, l. 8. The note was published in Maya Dobychina, *Evreiskoe getto v Kaluge (noiabr' — dekabr' 1941): Uchebnoe posobie* (Kaluga: Grif, 2012), 70. All Russian sources cited have been translated by the author.

the systematic liquidation of the ghetto.² According to the memoirs of one of the survivors of the ghetto, Naum Zisman, Frenkel was arrested by the Soviet authorities and was under investigation for some time on suspicion of complicity in Nazi crimes.³ The elders and members of Jewish Councils were often appointed by Nazi authorities or were sometimes chosen by Jews themselves in accordance with German requirements. The note from the Kaluga ghetto's elder is unique because it is almost the only wartime source that provides information on Jewish Councils' role in the occupied areas of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR).⁴

Members of Jewish Councils became Holocaust victims in most of the occupied Russian regions. The absence of official wartime records makes it difficult to investigate the role of these Jewish Councils. Only in a few cases has some information about the German regulation of Jewish life and lists of the ghettos' inmates been preserved.⁵ The files of the Extraordinary State Commission, hereinafter the ChGK, are the primary Soviet sources on the history and everyday lives of Jews in the ghettos on Soviet soil, particularly in the RSFSR.⁶ They include a number of final

- 2 Martin Dean, "Kaluga," in *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933-1945*, vol. 2, *Ghettos in German-Occupied Eastern Europe*, Part B, ed. Martin Dean (Washington, DC: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 1796.
- 3 Interview with former juvenile prisoner of the Jewish ghetto in Kaluga, Naum Zisman, July 20, 2010, Kaluga, cited in Dobychina, *Evreiskoe getto v Kaluge*, 99. It is unclear whether Frenkel was imprisoned by the Soviets. He died in 1961.
- 4 To facilitate understanding, I will sometimes replace the name of the RSFSR with Russia in the text. At the same time, when I mean the state formed after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, I will use the term Russian Federation. Additionally, all territorial designations indicated in the article are historical, corresponding to the period of the Second World War, when there were union republics (the RSFSR was one of them), autonomous regions, and autonomous republics within the RSFSR, including the Adyge Autonomous Region and the Crimean Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic (ASSR).
- 5 See: Order No. 8 of the Kaluga City Administration of November 8, 1941, GAKO, f. R-970, op. 3, d. 1, l. 10.
- 6 Founded on November 2, 1942, the full name of this commission was the "Extraordinary State Commission on Reporting and Investigating the Atrocities of the German Fascist Occupiers and their Accomplices and the Damages They Caused to Citizens, Kolkhozes, Public Organizations, State Enterprises of the USSR." On the critical analysis of its functions and collected evidence, see: Marina Sorokina, "People and Procedures: Toward a History of the Investigation of Nazi Crimes in the USSR," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 6, no. 4 (2005): 1-35; Irina Rebrova, *Re-Constructing Grassroots Holocaust Memory: The Case of the North Caucasus* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2020), 60-91.

regional reports that provide general information about the establishment of the ghettos, Jewish life inside them, the ghettos' subsequent destruction, and the mass killings of inmates.⁷ Such reports were compiled on the basis of eyewitness accounts of non-Jews who had friends or Jewish family members living in the ghettos and, in some cases, were able to secretly visit them. Additionally, Jews who survived the war offered rare information about everyday life in the ghettos.⁸ A small number of interviews with Holocaust survivors who testified about the role of particular members of some Jewish Councils were included in the wartime collection gathered by the "Commission on the History of the Great Patriotic War" at the Academy of Sciences of the Soviet Union.⁹ Fragmentary evidence of the councils' role can also be found in *The Black Book of Soviet Jewry*, which was prepared for publication by Ilya Ehrenburg and Vasily Grossman in the 1940s but was not published in Russia until the post-Soviet era.¹⁰

- 7 See: ChGK Report for the city Klinty of April 5, 1944, in State archive of Bryansk region (GABO), f. 6, op. 1, d. 54, part 2, l. 282, 285-288; ChGK Report for the city Zlynka of September 27, 1945, GABO, f. 2749, op. 1, d. 4, l. 134; Records of interrogation with the former head of the district police Ivan Blinov about the mass killings of civilians in the Monastyrshchinsky district of Smolensk region during the occupation of October 1, 1943, State Archive of Russian Federation (GARF), f. R-7021, op. 44, d. 628, l. 65.
- 8 See: Memoirs of neuropathologist Maria Faingor and the head of the pharmacy Anna Veller "79 days in Nazi captivity," December 1942, GAKO, f. R-3466, op. 1, d. 8, l. 19-23 (hereafter Memoirs of Faingor and Veller); Essay by Boris Wolfson "The Bloody Atrocity of the Germans in the Crimea," in State Archive of the Republic of Crimea (GARK), f. P-156, op. 1, d. 34, l. 1-20.
- 9 Transcript of a conversation with a citizen of Simferopol, a pharmacy department employee Ilya Sirota of February 16 and May 28, 1945, GARK, f. P-156, op. 1, d. 40, l. 112-126. See the published transcripts of conversations collected by the Commission on the History of the Great Patriotic War in the Crimean ASSR: Mikhail Tyaglyy, ed., *Peredaite detiam nashim o nashei sud'be. Sbornik dokumentov, dnevnikov i vospominanii* (Simferopol: BETs "Khesed Shimon", 2001), 100-36. For more on publications on the commission's records, see: Jochen Hellbeck, *Die Stalingrad-Protokolle. Sowjetische Augenzeugen berichten aus der Schlacht* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer Verlag, 2012); Sergei Zhuravlev, ed., *Vklad istorikov v sokhranenie istoricheskoi pamiati o Velikoi Otechestvennoi voine: na materialakh Komissii po istorii Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny AN SSSR, 1941-1945 gg.* (Moscow: Institut Rossiiskoi akademii nauk, 2015).
- 10 See: Letter from L. Tarabukin and D. Goldstein to the writer Yury Kalugin 'On the massacre in Essentuki,' GARF, f. 8114, op. 1, d. 963, l. 116-118; Transcript of a conversation with a citizen of Simferopol Evsei Gopshtein of August 16-17, 1944, GARF, f. 8114, op. 1, d. 961, l. 48-64. On the fate of the Black Book, see: Ilya Altman, "The History and Fate of the Black Book and the Unknown Black Book," in *The Unknown Black Book: The Holocaust in the German-Occupied Soviet Territories*,

Whereas the topic of Jewish Councils and their role in the ghettos was quite scarce in sources produced during the war, the existence and duties of Jewish elders became one of the central themes of oral interviews with Soviet Jews recorded in Israel starting in the 1970s. Very often, interviewers asked detailed questions about members of Jewish Councils in the ghettos, the attitude of ordinary Jews toward them, and the role of such Jewish representatives in daily life.¹¹ Such questions became rare in interviews by 1990s since the majority of Jews who gave testimonies in this later period were either children or teenagers during the war and, therefore, had limited knowledge and memories of the governing structures within ghettos.

The study of “Jewish Councils” role in the Holocaust in the Soviet Union began only in the early 1990s, and mainly focused on the Baltic states, Ukraine, and Belarus.¹² During the entire postwar period, Holocaust victims were not specifically distinguished from “Soviet peaceful citizens” who were the main victims of the Nazis according to Soviet historiography. Externalization was a principal feature of Holocaust studies in the Soviet Union, which means that the crimes against Jews were treated as such, but Holocaust history was understood as taking place outside the borders of the Soviet Union, with attention placed on mass killings of Jews in the death camps established in other parts of Eastern Europe.¹³ The mass killings of Jews on Soviet soil were not researched for decades. Holocaust history within the Russian Federation began to be officially studied only after the establishment of the Holocaust Center, a Russian research and educational institution in Moscow, in 1992. Published in 2011, the Russian-language *Encyclopedia of the*

ed. Joshua Rubenstein and Ilya Altman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), XIX–XXXVIII.

11 “Interviewer Guidelines” and “Pre-Interview Questionnaire,” University of Southern California Shoah Foundation website, accessed November 12, 2022, <http://sfi.usc.edu/vha/collecting>; “Oral History Interview Guidelines Written by Oral History Staff of USHMM,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum website, accessed September 28, 2024, link to guidelines accessible at <https://www.ushmm.org/collections/the-museums-collections/about/oral-history>.

12 See: Dina Porat, “The Jewish Councils of the Main Ghettos of Lithuania: A Comparison,” *Modern Judaism* 13, no. 2 (1993): 149-63; Yitzhak Arad, *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 141-210; Evgeny Rozenblat, “Organizatsiia iudenratov, uchet i registratsiia evreiskogo naseleniia zapadnykh oblastei Belorussii v 1941 g.,” in *Kholokost. Doklady na 8-i mezhdnarodnoi konferentsii po iudaike*, ed. Viktoriia Mochalova (Moscow: Sefer, 2001), 3-9.

13 For more on the term externalization, see: Olga Gershenson, *The Phantom Holocaust: Soviet Cinema and Jewish Catastrophe* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2013), 2.

Holocaust in the USSR highlights key cases of mass killings of Soviet Jews during the Second World War. It also identifies the location of such crimes and provides the exact or approximate numbers of Jews who perished on Soviet soil.¹⁴ Additionally, since the 2000s, local researchers in some Russian regions have been working to piece together Holocaust history and the memories of survivors. The history of Jewish Councils, however, is still largely understudied because of the limited range of available sources. Three historians—Ilya Altman, Vadim Dubson, and Alexander Kruglov—use essentially the same sources or cite the works of colleagues in their studies, creating a closed circle of researchers examining this topic.¹⁵ Kruglov and Dubson were among the authors of articles on the history of the ghettos in the former Soviet Union published in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum’s (USHMM) *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos*.¹⁶ Mikhail Tyaglyy slightly widens the range of sources in his investigation into the roles played by Jewish Councils in the ghettos established in the territory of the Crimean Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic (ASSR) while maintaining the same general conclusions as the historians mentioned above.¹⁷ Little research has been done on Jewish Councils in Russian cities where ghettos were not founded. This can be explained partially by the fact that they are barely mentioned in wartime sources (as a rule, only the printed name of a famous Jewish person from the city appears on the “Appeal to the Jewish Population,” which consisted of the order to be registered as a Jew and then to come to a designated location with hand luggage at an appointed day and hour under the pretext of “relocating to a new, safer place of residence”).¹⁸

Furthermore, little has been written on the Jewish Council members’ personal lives, despite the fact that their surnames are known in many

14 Ilya Altman, ed., *Kholokost na territorii SSSR: Entsiklopediia* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2011).

15 Vadim Dubson, “Getto na okkupirovannoi territorii Rossiiskoi Federatsii (1941-1942 gg.),” *Vestnik evreiskogo universiteta* 3, no. 21 (2000): 157-84; Alexander Kruglov, “Unichtozhenie evreev Smolenshchiny i Brianshchiny v 1941-1943 godakh,” *Vestnik Evreiskogo universiteta v Moskve*, 3, no. 7 (1995): 193-220; Il’ja Al’tmann, *Opfer des Hasses: Der Holocaust in der UdSSR 1941-1945* (Gleichen: Muster-Schmidt, 2008), 135-64.

16 Dean, *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933-1945*, 2:1756-1839.

17 Mikhail Tyaglyy, “Evreiskie komitety v okkupirovannom natsistami Krymu: postanovka problemy,” *Kholokost i suchastnist. Naukovo-pedahobichnyi buleten’ Ukrain-skoho tsentru vyvchennia istorii Kholokostu* 11 (2003): 160-68.

18 See, for example: “Appeal to the Jewish Population of the City of Voroshilovsk,” GARF, f. R-7021, op. 17, d. 1, l. 95.

cases. Most of the available evidence suggests that in occupied regions of Russia, the Jewish Council members or elders were imposed Jewish representatives with no real authority since the duration of ghettos was very short. As a result, Holocaust survivors hardly ever recounted their experiences with councils in later memoirs and testimonies. In this study, I reconstruct the overall organizational structure and work of Jewish Councils without paying attention to regional specificities. In the first part, I describe the fundamental process that led to the establishment of Jewish Councils in various Russian regions both inside and outside of ghettos, with a specific emphasis on the Holocaust in the RSFSR. Then, after describing general characteristics of Jewish Councils as a powerless and imposed structure to better control the Jews before their murder, I analyze the main tasks of the Jewish Councils. Through this analysis, I show that Jewish Councils and elders were unwilling pawns; I also offer reflections on their nominal leadership even on the brink of their own imminent demise.

Fate of Jews in the Occupied Regions of the RSFSR

In June 1941, at the moment of the German invasion, the RSFSR was one of fifteen Soviet republics. The length of the borders of the territory of Russia under Nazi occupation was the longest among the union republics: from the Gulf of Finland in the north to the Black Sea in the south. At the same time, only the European parts of the Russian Soviet Republic were occupied, but the largest cities with the highest concentration of Jews (primarily Moscow and Leningrad, now St. Petersburg) were never captured.¹⁹ According to the All-Union Population Census of 1939, more than 956,000 Jews lived in the RSFSR.²⁰ In the areas occupied during the war, there were roughly 200,000 Jews,²¹ but this number does not include those who fled from Poland and the western Soviet republics (the Ukrainian, Byelorussian, and Moldavian SSRs) since 1939. The entirety of the RSFSR's occupied territory (using contemporary borders, this equates to twenty-three Russian regions) was under the control of the German military administration. Here, both Einsatzgruppen and Wehr-

19 Ilya Altman, "RSFSR," in *Kholokost na territorii SSSR: Entsiklopediya*, 871.

20 "Natsional'nyi sostav SSSR po respublikam, kraiam i oblastiam. RSFSR," in *Vsesoyuznaia perepis' naseleniia 1939 goda: osnovnye itogi*, ed. Yury Poliakov (Moscow: Nauka, 1992), 59.

21 Altman, "RSFSR," 871.

macht military units were active and, together with local auxiliaries, were responsible for killing thousands of Jews and other victim groups.

According to available sources, fifty-six ghettos were created within the borders of the occupied RSFSR: forty-eight in the western regions of Russia, and four each in the North Caucasus and Crimea.²² They were primarily established in Russia's western regions either immediately following the start or during the early months of the occupation. These ghettos were relatively small, housing only a few hundred people. The reason for this was that with the exception of Nalchik in the North Caucasus, where mountain Jews²³ lived and where the so-called open ghetto was created, none of the occupied Russian cities in which ghettos were established had a prewar Jewish population larger than three thousand persons.²⁴ The ghettos operated for a few days or up to eleven months (in Smolensk). The relatively long existence of the Smolensk ghetto (August 5, 1941 to July 15, 1942) may be explained by the German army's need for labor in the city, which was a strategically important railway junction in the direction of Moscow.²⁵ In order to organize control over Jews, the German authorities often, but not in every known ghetto, appointed a nominal government, a Jewish Council, composed of councilors or elders. Most able-bodied men and occasionally young women were killed first in order to prevent any potential resistance during the later ghetto's liquidation.²⁶ That is, the involvement of Jews in forced labor, which could be economically significant, was not typical in the occupied Russian regions. According to different estimates, between 25,000 and 33,000 ghetto prisoners were killed on Russian soil.²⁷ Over

22 See maps for Russia and the Crimea, in Dean, *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos*, 2:1760, 2:1787-88.

23 For more detailed information about mountain Jews, see: "Gorskie Evrei," in *Kratkaia evreiskaia entsiklopediia*, ed. Oren (Nadel') Itskhak and Mikhael' Zand (Jerusalem: Keter, 1982), 2:182; Valery Dymshits, ed., *Gorskie evrei: istoriia, etnografiia, kul'tura* (Jerusalem/Moscow: DAAT/Znanie, 1999).

24 Al'tmann, *Opfer des Hasses*, 131.

25 Jews from this ghetto were involved in forced labor on the railroad. See: Lev Kotov, "Kak bylo unichtozheno Smolenskoe getto," in *Krai Smolenskii*, no. 2 (1990): 40-48; "Smolensk," in Dean, *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos*, 1820-23.

26 The same tactic was used in the ghettos of Eastern Byelorussian SSR. See: Daniil Romanovsky, "Sovetskie evrei pod natsistskoi okkupatsiei (na materiale Severo-Vostochnoi i Severnoi Rossii)," in *Kovcheg: Al'manakh evreiskoi kul'tury* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1990), 302-3; Mordechai Altshuler, "The Unique Features of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union," in *Jews and Jewish Life in Russia and in the Soviet Union*, ed. Yaacov Ro'i (Portland, OR: F. Cass, 1995), 176.

27 Al'tmann, *Opfer des Hasses*, 316-17; Martin Dean, "Occupied Russian Territories," in Dean, *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos*, 2:1782.

3,500 Jews were saved when the Red Army liberated several regions in the winter of 1941/42, which was quite exceptional.²⁸ Only a few hundred Jews managed to survive from the other ghettos in German-occupied Russian territory either because they hid among the local population or because they joined the Soviet partisans.²⁹

While ghettos existed in the western regions of the RSFSR, they were not created in the southern regions, which were partially occupied from the summer of 1942 until the winter-spring of 1943. This was not a traditional region of Jewish settlement (with the exception of Rostov-on-Don and Nalchik). However, after the summer of 1941, large streams of refugees from the western regions had fled there and ended up staying in the rather warm climate, where there was better access to food. Eventually, they also found themselves under occupation.³⁰ Mass killings of Jews were organized during the first weeks of the occupation. In many southern cities, several Jews were appointed to transmit German orders to the entire Jewish population, which mainly involved registration. After their registration, all Jews were ordered to come to a designated location under the pretext of “relocating to a new safer place of residence.”³¹ They were then taken to the outskirts of a city or a village where they were shot or killed in special gas vans. The corpses were dumped into mass graves, which were often dug by the local non-Jewish population, Soviet prisoners of war, or sometimes by the future victims themselves. If we consider the more or less accepted number of Holocaust victims in Russia (between 120,000 and 140,000 people), scholars suggest that more than half of them were killed in the southern Russia regions (between 58,000 and 87,000 people).³²

28 This includes about 3,000 mountain Jews of Nalchik, whose status was investigated for a long time by the Nazis, and as a result, they were able to survive thanks to the liberation of the region, together with about 470 people from the ghettos of Kaluga and Pskov regions. Pavel Polyán, *Mezhdú Aushvitsem i Bab'im Iarom: razmyslenniia i issledovaniia* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2010), 142; Al'tmann, *Opfer des Hasses*, 129.

29 Dean, “Occupied Russian Territories,” 1785.

30 On Holocaust history in the North Caucasus see: Crispin Brooks and Kiril Feferman, ed. *Beyond the Pale: The Holocaust in the North Caucasus* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2020); Rebrova, *Re-Constructing Grassroots Holocaust Memory*, 39–54.

31 “Appeal to the Jewish Population for Stavropol region of 1942,” GARF, f. R-7021, op. 17, d. 1, l. 95.

32 See the table “Number of Holocaust Victims in the North Caucasus,” in Rebrova, *Re-Constructing Grassroots Holocaust Memory*, 343.

General Characteristics of Jewish Councils and Elders as a Nominal Government

Despite distinctions between the Holocaust in the RSFSR's western and southern regions, German authorities established Jewish Councils almost everywhere to control and manage the life of Jewish communities. Different terms are used in Russian-language sources to refer to these councils: "Jewish Council," "Jewish Committee," "Council of Elders," "Community Board," "*Kagal*," and "*Idnrat*" (in Yiddish, *Yidnrat*). In Russian-language historical studies, however, the term "*Judenrat*" has become the norm, and "Jewish Councils" is used less frequently.³³ Various German orders and directives regulated the establishment of Jewish Councils as representative bodies of the Jewish community both inside and outside the ghetto. These organs were developed as the Wehrmacht advanced deeper into the Soviet Union, and they were based on Germans' previous experience formulating anti-Jewish laws in the German Reich and other occupied territories. Additionally, the Soviet Union was given special consideration as in the eyes of the Nazi authorities, Jews posed a greater threat there than in other European nations because Soviet Jews "were strengthened in their self-confidence to a great degree during the quarter century of Jewish-Bolshevik rule. They appeared to be not only self-assured but even arrogant in many cases when the German troops entered."³⁴

Researchers have cited a number of directives in their analyses of the establishment of Jewish Councils on Soviet soil, including administrative order No. 2 of the Rear Commander of Army Group Center dated July 13, 1941.³⁵ A "*Judenrat*" was to be established in each locality in

33 See: Isaiah Trunk, *Judenrat: The Jewish Councils in Eastern Europe under Nazi Occupation* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1972); Rozenblat, "Organizatsiia iudenratov," 3-9; Eliakhu Iones, *Evrei L'vova v gody Vtoroi mirovoi voynny i Katastrofy evropeyskogo evreistva 1939-1944* (Moscow: Rossiiskaya biblioteka Kholokosta, 1999), 110-22.

34 "Ereignismeldung Nr. 31 of 23. Juli," 1941, in *Die "Ereignismeldungen UdSSR" 1941. Dokumente der Einsatzgruppen in der Sowjetunion*, ed. Klaus Michael Mallmann et al. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2011), 167. English translation: Yitzhak Arad, Shmuel Krakowski, Shmuel Spector, and Stella Schosberger, ed., *The Einsatzgruppen Reports: Selections from the Dispatches of the Nazi Death Squads' Campaign against the Jews July 1941-January 1943* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1989), 42-43.

35 See: Dubson, "Getto na okkupirovannoi territorii Rossiiskoi Federatsii," 166; Al'tmann, *Opfer des Hasses*, 137; Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, vol. 1 (New York: Holmes and Meyer, 1985), 350.

accordance with this order. The number of the council members varied according to the number of Jews living in the settlements. For communities with fewer than 10,000 residents, there would be twelve council members, and for communities with more than 10,000 residents, twenty-four members would be appointed. Jews were responsible for electing a chairman and selecting council members. The composition of such governing bodies had to be approved by the local military commander and members of the German security police. All members of the community were required to obey the Jewish Council's orders, which were based on German directives. The field and local commandant's offices had the authority to impose the harshest punishments—up to and including the death penalty—on those who resisted as well as members of Jewish Councils who disobeyed German orders.³⁶ Another document, the report of Einsatzgruppe B from July 23, 1941, offers further details about the composition and duties of the Jewish Councils:

In each city, a provisional chairman of a Jewish Council was appointed and tasked to form a provisional Judenrat of three to ten people. The Judenrat bears collective responsibility for the behavior of the Jewish population. Besides, it has to immediately begin registering Jews living in the area. In addition, the Judenrat must organize work groups consisting of all male Jews aged 15-55 to carry out cleaning and other work for German [civilian] officers and the Army. Also, a few female work groups are to be set up for the same age-group.³⁷

Due to the small Jewish population in occupied Russian settlements, the composition of the Jewish Councils did not closely adhere to the German directives. Where there was only one chairman of the Jewish Council, he was known as the elder of the ghetto. They were typically members of the intelligentsia who spoke German. According to the testimonies of Holocaust survivors and brief references to the activities of Jewish Councils in official Soviet sources, the membership of Jewish Councils in each locality was decided arbitrarily regardless of the number of Jews. For example, there were approximately one hundred Jews in the Toropets ghetto (Kalinin, now Tver' region), and the Jewish Council had three members,³⁸ whereas there was only one elder in the Kaluga ghetto, which

36 Cited in: Dubson, "Getto na okkupirovannoi territorii Rossiiskoi Federatsii," 166.

37 "Ereignismeldung Nr. 31 of 23. Juli, 1941, 167."

38 Cited in: Alexander Kruglov and Martin Dean, "Toropets," in Dean, *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos*, 2:1830-31.

held 160 Jews.³⁹ In his interview, survivor Lev Sorin recalled how Jewish Councils were established in the Tatarsk ghetto (Smolensk region), where about six hundred people were imprisoned: “The Judenrat was formed, three persons considered themselves head and shoulders above us. It was Belenky, Khazanov, and I forgot the third one.”⁴⁰

Under German pressure, elders were frequently selected rapidly and haphazardly. The selection of council members in the Kaluga ghetto is described in the memoirs of Maria Faingor and Anna Veller:

Kupfer, the chief of [the German] police, came into the ghetto one day and told everyone, “Choose a zhid prefect from your zhid kagal.” The Jews called out M.I. [Mark Isaevich], Frenkel’s name. Kupfer instructed Frenkel to submit lists of all zhids the following day; and then he left.⁴¹

Since not a single Jew appointed to the role of elder survived in places without a ghetto, we do not know how the process of their selection or appointment took place. Further, because all of the available “Appeals to the Jewish Population” were typewritten copies that could easily be used by the Germans without the elders’ permission, it is likely that these individuals became victims of circumstance and did not physically sign any orders.

In his study of the composition and activities of Jewish Councils in the Crimean ASSR, Mikhail Tyaglyy stated that at some point, it was difficult for the German administration to appoint a well-known or reputable council leader. Having captured this or that settlement, the Nazis did not have accurate information about the size of the Jewish population.⁴² Besides, communal forms of Jewish life were destroyed under the Soviet authorities decades before the war started both in Crimea and other settlements with a historical Jewish presence.⁴³ The majority of Jewish organizations and authoritative community leaders (rabbis, public figures, and politicians) to whom the Nazis could turn were no longer present, in contrast to the eastern European countries where, according to some

39 Memoirs of Faingor and Veller, 21.

40 Interview with Lev Sorin, July 10, 1996, Visual History Archive of the University of South California Shoah Foundation (VHA USCFSF), code 17264.

41 Memoirs of Faingor and Veller, 21.

42 Tyaglyy, “Evreiskie komitety v okkupirovannom natsistami Krymu,” 162.

43 Shmuel Spector, “The Holocaust of Ukrainian Jews,” in *Bitter Legacy: Confronting the Holocaust in the USSR*, ed. Zvi Gitelman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 48.

sources, about 60 percent of “Jewish Councils” were composed of members who had been actively engaged in Jewish communal life before the war.⁴⁴ As a result, the German authorities took the following actions: “Yevpatoria [the Crimean ASSR] was occupied by Germans on October 31 [1941]. Three days later, the Gestapo showed up. Ten Jews, including my friend Berlinerblau, were detained on the street on November 5th in the evening. All of them were appointed to the Jewish Council.”⁴⁵ In a 1944 account for the forthcoming *Black Book*, Evsei Gopshtein, a survivor from Simferopol, Crimean ASSR, recalled the establishment of a Jewish Council in the city:

In Simferopol, there was a man without a specific occupation named Zeltser, who worked in a housing cooperative. The German command gave him instructions to set up a Jewish Council. ... Perhaps Zeltser was the first to get in touch with them. ... The council’s members were average, unassuming, and culturally inappropriate for the positions for which they had been nominated.⁴⁶

According to Gopshtein, the Jewish intelligentsia was motivated to assist the council in its work due to the fact that there was a lack of authoritative leadership within the Jewish community. In his monograph and the *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust in the USSR*, Ilya Altman presents the table “Jewish Councils in Russia,” compiled on the basis of sources for seventeen ghettos. He shows the numerical and professional composition of the Jewish Councils. Twelve physicians (including one pharmacist), three accountants, one teacher, one writer, and one artist were among the at least forty-three members of the Jewish Councils in the Russian ghettos.⁴⁷ The occupations of twenty-six persons remain unknown.

44 Al'tmann, *Opfer des Hasses*, 140.

45 Letter by Fishgoit (Yevpatoriia), in *Chernaia kniga o zlodeiskom povsemestnom ubiistve evreev nemetsko-fashistskimi zakhvatshikami vo vremenno okkupirovannykh raionakh Sovetskogo Soiuza i v lageriakh Pol'shi vo vremia voiny 1941-1945 gg.*, ed. Vasily Grossman and Ilya Ehrenburg (Vilnius: Yad, 1993), 206-7.

46 “Transcript of a conversation with a resident of Simferopol, Evsei Efimovich Gopshtein, of August 16-17, 1944,” in *Neizvestnaia “Chernaia kniga”: materialy k “Chernoii knige,”* ed. Ilya Altman (Moscow: AST CORPUS, 2015), 240-41.

47 Al'tmann, *Opfer des Hasses*, 151, Al'tman, “RSFSR,” 874.

Tasks of the Jewish Councils' Members and Elders

The elected or appointed members of the Jewish Councils in the RSFSR had the same responsibilities as similar organizations in other Soviet republics and Eastern European countries. However, the significance of their duties was minimized because of the short lifespan of Jewish communities in the occupied zones of Russia. According to the available sources, the Jewish Councils in Russian localities were primarily responsible for a number of different tasks.

First, councils were responsible for registering the Jewish population and compiling lists of Jews. Registration was the German authorities' first step in identifying and accounting for the Jewish population, and it was frequently carried out prior to the establishment of a ghetto. Otto Ohlendorf, the former leader of Einsatzgruppe D, claimed at the Nuremberg trial that the Jews registered themselves; that is, the Jewish Councils were given instructions to register community members.⁴⁸ The “*Judenrat*” was established in Nevel' (Kalinin, now Pskov region) soon after the occupation started. It was responsible for registering the entire Jewish population. It also had to ensure that Jews wore a distinguishing emblem in the form of a yellow star.⁴⁹ The registration, the formation of the Jewish Council, and the establishment of the ghettos occurred simultaneously in Smolensk.⁵⁰

Registration was required for the further organization of Jewish life and forced labor in several localities. Shortly after the occupation of Yessentuki (Ordzhonikidze, now Stavropol region), the *Ortskommandant* (local commander) ordered the establishment of a Jewish Council consisting of five members. It was responsible for carrying out the registration of all the Jews in the town, which then included 507 able-bodied Jews and around 1,500 persons deemed unfit to work, including children and elderly people.⁵¹ Registration was also conducted in regions where ghettos were never established. For example, the first “Appeal to the

48 International Military Tribunal, *Trial of the Major War Criminals before the International Military Tribunal “Blue Series,”* vol. 4, 1945, https://hdl.loc.gov/loc.law/llmlp.2011525338_NT_Vol-IV, 324.

49 Alexander Kruglov and Martin Dean, “Nevel’,” in Dean, *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos*, 2:1808; “Ereignismeldung Nr. 73 of 4. September 1941,” in Mallmann et al., ed., *Die “Ereignismeldungen UdSSR” 1941*, 406.

50 The ChGK report for the city of Smolensk of September 28, 1943, State archive of Smolensk region (GASO), f. R-1630, op. 2, d. 19, l. 5-6.

51 Letter from L. Tarabukin and D. Goldstein to the writer Yury Kalugin, 237; Aleksei Tolstoi, “Korichnevyyi Durman,” *Pravda*, August 5, 1943.

Jewish Population” of the city of Rostov-on-Don (Rostov region) was published on August 4, 1942 on behalf of Sonderkommando 10a Einsatzgruppe D and was signed by the famous local Jew Dr. G. Lur’e, who was appointed the chairman of the puppet Jewish Council.⁵²

Compiling lists of Jews was also part of the registration process. The introduction of this essay quoted the explanation offered by the elder of the Kaluga ghetto for his complicity in the process. Intriguingly, the elder Mark Frenkel compiled six different lists of Jews, listing them by name, address, age, gender, and number of family members.⁵³ As the military campaign dragged on in the autumn of 1941, it became clear that the Wehrmacht was not prepared for winter conditions since it had wrongly assumed that victory would follow soon after the German invasion. In order to make up for the lack of resources such as food and warm clothing, Jewish property was confiscated. The lists of Jews provided detailed information about the size and property of local Jewish communities.

Second, councils were charged with coordinating the relocation of Jews into ghettos or organizing their “resettlement” to locations without ghettos. The first task of Jewish Council members was coordinating the relocation of Jews into ghettos in the occupied western Russian regions. This was the task, for example, of *Judenrat* members in Velizh (Smolensk region). According to the memoirs of survivor Bronislava Brook, some Jews ended up living in a pigpen in this ghetto, while those who bribed the *Judenrat* lived in houses.⁵⁴ In Yalta (the Crimean ASSR), the Jewish Council was responsible for organizing the transfer of Jews into the ghetto as well.⁵⁵ In localities without ghettos, gathering Jews for “resettlement” was again the last task of elders or members of Jewish Councils. In Rostov-on-Don, the second “Appeal to the Jewish Population” was also signed by Dr. Lur’e. It called for Jews to gather at six assembly points in the city for further “resettlement.”⁵⁶ The elder, whose name was randomly selected by the German authorities, was among the assembled Jews killed in Zmievskaia *balka* (ravine) on the outskirts of Rostov-on-Don on August 11 and 12, 1942.

52 A photocopy of the appeal was published in Evgeny Movshovich, *Ocherki istorii evreev na Donu* (Rostov-on-Don: ZAO “Kniga,” 2011), 143.

53 The lists were published: Dobychina, *Evreiskoe getto v Kaluge*, 42-70.

54 Testimony of Bronislava Brook, Yad Vashem Archives (YVA), 03/4646, p. 138.

55 Martin Dean, “Eastern Ukraine and Crimea Region,” in Dean, *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos*, 2:1757.

56 “Appeal to the Jewish Population of the City of Rostov of August 9, 1942,” State Archive of Rostov Region (GARO), f. R-3613, op. 1, d. 1, l. 2. A photocopy of the “Appeal” was published in Movshovich, *Ocherki istorii evreev na Donu*, 144.

Third, councils were responsible for organizing and controlling everyday life in the ghettos. The Jewish Council's responsibilities in the Kaluga ghetto included overseeing the daily activities of the inmates, assigning labor, and ordering Jews to work.⁵⁷ The elders in Smolensk and Zlynka (Orel, now Bryansk region) maintained order within the ghetto.⁵⁸ In Yalta, the Jewish Council was made responsible for organizing workshops, a hospital, and a Jewish police force inside the ghetto.⁵⁹ Due to the increasing death rates in the Kaluga ghetto, elder Mark Frenkel applied to the commandant's office for permission to open an ambulatory station. The assistant director of the health department, Dr. Milenushkin, refused the request and even forbade anyone to dispense prescription medicine without his personal approval. As any urgent medication required at least two days to arrive, the medical staff was unable to provide sick Jews with emergency care. At the same time, Jews were denied medical care in the local hospital. Ghetto doctors were only able to help with kind words.⁶⁰ The local German military administration was only interested in maintaining order in the ghetto, for which elders were responsible. Jews were denied medical care and other assistance, and elders could not do anything about it.

Fourth, Jewish Councils communicated with the German local military administration. The Jewish Councils' primary role was to carry out all orders issued by the German local administration and police units. According to the files of the ChGK, the *Ortskommandant* appointed a Jewish elder in the Velikie Luki ghetto (Kalinin, now Pskov region), a sixty-five-year-old dentist Labas (the first name is unknown). Labas had to give a daily report in writing that all the Jews in the ghetto were present and that the total number was correct. If any inmate was missing, Labas would be beaten. German records indicate that fifty-nine Jews were registered in Velikie Luki in September 1941.⁶¹ The elder in the Kaluga ghetto was "the only channel for communication with the German authorities; all other Jews were strictly forbidden from entering any institutions."⁶² The same duties were carried out by the Jewish Council in Velizh.⁶³ In his interview,

57 Memoirs of Faingor and Veller, 21.

58 Testimony by Vladimir Khivser, YVA, 03/4671, p. 229; Interview with Mikhail Liubkin, Novozybkov, Russia, May 30, 1997, VHA USCFSF, code 37882.

59 Dean, "Eastern Ukraine and Crimea Region," 2:1757.

60 Memoirs Faingor and Veller, 21-22.

61 Information about the destruction and atrocities committed by the Nazi invaders in certain areas of the Kalinin region, 1943, GARF, f. R-7021, op. 26, d. 4, l. 1.

62 Memoirs Faingor and Veller, 21.

63 Testimony by Isaak Brook, YVA, 03/4389, p. 8.

Zlynka ghetto survivor Mikhail Liubkin recalled that the ghetto had an elder named Gunitsky (the first name is unknown): “I don’t remember the others; he was in charge. He had contacts with the authorities, they gave him some tasks and assignments.”⁶⁴ In this way, Jewish Council members and elders served as the bridge between the Jewish community and the German authorities. These individuals, however, were not granted any privileges in the ghettos in Russia. On the contrary, there were instances when the community’s leaders rather than common citizens were held accountable for even the smallest violation or delay in the implementation of orders.⁶⁵

Fifth, Jewish Councils were charged with coordinating their community’s involvement in forced labor. During the brief existence of ghettos in various cities and towns of Russia, Jews were forced in some localities to perform the hardest and dirtiest jobs: sawing and carrying firewood, digging up stumps, cleaning streets, and scrubbing toilets. Jews were beaten during their forced labor.⁶⁶ In some regions, Jewish labor was used to unload and load heavy materials. In Gusino (Smolensk region), Jews were forced to clear snow from the railway tracks; in Liubavichi, they repaired roads and bridges; and in Khislavichi (both in Smolensk region), they were forced to build pillboxes (concrete, dug-in guard posts with holes for firing weapons).⁶⁷ In Petrovichi (Smolensk region), the elder was required to “report to the commandant’s office every day for a work order.”⁶⁸ Lev Sorin, a survivor of the Tatarsk ghetto, recalled in an interview that “if the Germans needed work to be done, then they would appoint someone to clean something or chop firewood through the Jewish Council.”⁶⁹

Jews were typically prohibited from working in their field of expertise in the ghettos, which was done deliberately to humiliate them by forcing them into the dirtiest jobs. The ghettos of Velizh and Khislavichi were exceptions, and the Germans used Jewish artisans’ labor and killed them last.⁷⁰ In Smolensk, the German commandant appointed Dr. Painsou

64 Interview with Mikhail Liubkin.

65 See: Petr Nesterenko “Kak eto bylo,” July 5, 1944, YVA, P.21.2, file 8, p. 3.

66 Testimony by Tatyana Mil’kheker, GARF, f. R-7021, op. 47, d. 352, l. 3.

67 Testimony by Nikolai Smirnov, GARF, f. R-7021, op. 44, d. 630, l. 219; Testimonies by Miron Ioffe and Elisaveta Voinovskaya, YVA, 033/3275, p. 1, 113.

68 Valentina Maksimchuk, “Tragediia v Petrovichakh,” in *Bab’i iary Smolenshchiny: poiaвление, zhizn’ i katastrofa smolenskogo evreistva*, ed. Iosif Tsynman (Smolensk: OOO “Rus’,” 2001), 183.

69 Interview with Lev Sorin.

70 Testimonies by Emma Budrianovich and M. Berdnikova, YVA, 033/3275, p. 43-44, 170-71.

(first name unknown), a well-known dentist, as the elder in charge of the ghetto's affairs. In the words of one witness, Painson "complained many times about this onerous duty, which he had to carry out in the interests of the Jewish population but without any prospect of a good outcome."⁷¹ He organized the Jews for forced labor in accordance with the commandant's orders and enforced security inside the ghetto. Military personnel and government officials in Simferopol benefited personally from the work of Jewish artisans, and Jewish elders were responsible for organizing this labor:

There was no ghetto in Simferopol, so Jews were required to travel to the community [office] daily; the Germans then took them to their jobs. All of the dirty work was done by Jews. Women were brought to the hospital, which used to be the first Soviet hospital, and they were put to work cleaning the restrooms and washing potatoes at the cannery.⁷²

Obviously, the Germans were not interested in the professional qualifications of Jews; it was more important to dehumanize them through forced labor.

Sixth, councils were responsible for the despoliation of the rest of the Jewish property on behalf of German authorities in order to meet the needs of the Germans. Jewish elders also organized the collection of valuables and other items demanded by the Germans. According to the memoirs of Holocaust survivor Busya Liubkina, the Jewish Council served as a means by which the occupation authorities gradually robbed the Jews living in the Zlynka ghetto: "They advised the Jews to make extensive preparations for this and then gradually took away everything from them. The ghetto received regular police visits."⁷³ In Il'ino (Smolensk, now Tver' region), a Jewish elder was chosen. Once when the police chief called him in, the chief insisted that he receive a gray suit from the Jews or else the elder would be shot. Another time, the police chief demanded white paper. The elder was responsible for fulfilling every single one of the police chief's orders.⁷⁴

71 Testimony by Professor Boris Bazilevsky of September 28, 1943, FSB archive of Smolensk region (AFSBsmO), case 9856-S, p. 28.

72 Tyaglyy, *Peredaite detiam nashim o nashei sud'be*, 121.

73 Interview with Busya Liubkina, Dnepropetrovsk, Ukraine, November 24, 1997, VHA USCSF, code 38878.

74 Cited in: Dubson, "Getto na okkupirovannoi territorii Rossiiskoi Federatsii," 173.

Local German military authorities consistently imposed fees on the inmates of ghettos. Jews were required to turn over gold, furs, and cash. The wide range of property seized from Jews is shocking. Along with the bare necessities, the Germans also took items that had no connection whatsoever to the demands of war. In Yalta, members of Sonderkommando 11A were mainly responsible for introducing anti-Jewish measures. All money and valuables had to be surrendered to the Germans through the Jewish Council.⁷⁵ In Simferopol, the Germans established a *Judenrat* and compelled the Jews to make large monetary contributions.⁷⁶ Shortly before the liquidation of the Smolensk ghetto, a large fee was imposed on the Jews. In a letter dated July 5, 1942, the appointed mayor of Smolensk B. Men'shagin reported the following to the leader of Einsatzgruppe B unit: "By request of the commandant's office, 60 sets of bedding and three sewing machines were seized in the ghetto. The Jewish Council received a 5,000 ruble fine for the delay of the bedding delivery."⁷⁷ The confiscation of property was done not only to supply the German army during the winter of 1941/42 but also to allow the command staff and the German military administration to make a meager profit.

Finally, councils participated in preparations for the executions of Jews. On the order of the Security Police and *Sicherheitsdienst* (SD), members of the Jewish Councils in some ghettos had to help organize the transfer of all Jews to killing sites. With the aid of a detailed registration list, they put family after family onto trucks that departed and then returned for more families. The members of the Jewish Councils checked off those who had been taken away.⁷⁸ The last truck took away the members of the Jewish Councils.

Epilogue: The Fate of Jewish Councils' Members and Elders

Ilya Altman identified several types of elders based on the sources that discuss the activities of Jewish Councils in the Soviet Union. The first type includes those who bluntly refused to assist the Nazis. These people were either killed immediately during the mass killings of Jews or they

75 ChGK report on the crimes of the Nazi-German occupiers in the city of Yalta of July 17, 1944, GARF, f. R-7021, op. 9, d. 59, l. 25.

76 Ibid.; Dean, "Eastern Ukraine and Crimea Region," 2:1757.

77 Kotov, "Kak bylo unichtozheno Smolenskoe getto," 45. According to other sources, a fine of 7,000 rubles was imposed on the ghetto. Testimony by Aleksandra Beineroich, GARF, f. R-7021, op. 44, d. 15, l. 41.

78 Cited in Tyaglyy, "Evreiskie komitety v okkupirovannom natsistami Krymu," 166.

committed suicide. The second includes Jewish elders who took part in resistance movements either directly or indirectly. The third type includes people who complied with the fundamental demands of the Nazis while also purposefully disobeying orders, engaging in sabotage, attempting to improve detention conditions, and aiding prisoners. The fourth type followed all Nazi orders except for anything that contributed to mass executions (compiling lists, delivering the doomed, searching for fugitives). The fifth obeyed orders without question or after engaging in some “bargaining” with the occupation authorities.⁷⁹ Of these five types of elders, the third and fifth were most prevalent in occupied Russian regions. The ghettos’ relatively brief existence, small size, and the presence of large numbers of refugees from other areas (and consequently the discord this influx produced within the community itself) generated more oppressive conditions that made the open resistance of members of the Jewish Councils impossible.

The position of the Jewish elders, whether elected or appointed, did not significantly differ from that of other Jews living inside or outside ghettos. A survivor of the Velizh ghetto named Isaak Brook wrote in his memoirs that “the elders of the Judenrat themselves did not know anything detailed; they were unhappy people.”⁸⁰ Professor Boris Basilevsky later claimed that the elder of the Smolensk ghetto “repeatedly complained about the heavy burden that he had to bear in the interests of the Jewish population with no prospects of a successful outcome.”⁸¹ During the German confiscation actions or mass killings, Jewish Council members and elders frequently became hostages of such measures. Jewish elders did not have the slightest chance of affecting the fate of other Jews. In fact, Jewish Council members and elders almost everywhere on Russian soil became victims of mass executions themselves.

All Jewish Council members and elders were killed either during the liquidation of ghettos or alongside other Jews in areas without ghettos, with the exception of a few rare instances when elders were able to flee. Many of those who survived until the liberation were accused by the Soviet government of being Nazi auxiliaries and were sentenced to death by Soviet tribunals. The documents from these trials are still not accessible to researchers in the Russian Federation. Those individuals who were permitted to leave the Soviet Union later appeared before “courts of

79 Al'tmann, *Opfer des Hasses*, 152-57.

80 Testimony by Isaak Brook, p. 8.

81 N. Il'kevich, “Smolensk vo vlasti nepriiatelia: 26 mesiatsev okkupatsii,” *Smena. Smolensk*, July 23, 1994.

honor” in Israel and other states.⁸² The few survivors from the same ghetto frequently had opposing opinions about the actions taken by the members and elders of Jewish Councils. Unlike in the other Soviet republics and Eastern European countries, the role of Jewish Councils in the occupied zones of the RSFSR was minimal, and their members and elders were, according to available sources, completely powerless.

82 Al'tmann, *Opfer des Hasses*, 151.