

Judenräte and the Jewish Communities of Eastern Europe

This essay provides an overview of work-in-progress on the social history of small ghettos in occupied Poland. Small ghettos, classified here as those established in towns and villages with Jewish communities numbering fewer than five thousand persons in September 1939, were the majority of ghettos in occupied Poland. According to the USHMM *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos*, there were 579 ghettos established in communities with fewer than five thousand Jews, including 237 in communities with fewer than one thousand Jews.¹ But aside from studies of individual communities, their collective story remains untold. My research project challenges this lacuna, exploring various aspects of these ghettos' existence and the everyday life and death of their inhabitants. One part of this story is the functioning of *Judenräte* (Jewish Councils)² in these communities, which was very different from the Jewish Councils in large ghettos, which are the prism through which we usually look at Jewish administration in occupied Europe. Thus, exploring smaller Jewish Councils greatly enriches our understanding of victims' experiences of the Holocaust.

Judenräte were defined by historian and Holocaust survivor Philip Friedman as "all forms of the quasi-autonomous bodies imposed by the Nazis on the Jewish community."³ In Western and Central Europe, these meant such diverse organs as the *Union Generale des Israelites de France* (UGIF), or the *Reichsvereinigung* (German Association). In Eastern Europe,

- 1 USHMM, *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos*, vol. 2, *Ghettos in German-Occupied Eastern Europe*, ed. Martin Dean (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012).
- 2 In this article, I use the term "*Judenrat*" to underline its German-imposed character and denote its separation from earlier Jewish communal bodies.
- 3 Philip Friedman, *Roads to Extinction: Essays on the Holocaust* (New York: Conference on Jewish Social Studies, 1980), 540.

and in particular occupied Poland (pre-1939), the *Judenräte* were, in the vast majority of cases, limited to local communities. But here, too, they reflected different regional practices of genocide as they evolved over time.

Following the invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939, setting up *Judenräte* was one of the first steps related to Jews undertaken by the SS and representatives of the German police. The policy was formulated in writing in the *Schnellbrief* sent by the head of the Security Police, Reinhard Heydrich, to Einsatzgruppen commanders on September 21, 1939, while the military conquest of Poland was still ongoing. It dealt with, in part, the “Jewish Councils of Elders” or “Jewish Councils,” which were to be “made fully responsible (in the literal sense of the word) for the exact execution according to terms of all instructions released or yet to be released.”⁴

In territories occupied by Germany in the autumn of 1939, *Judenräte* usually functioned long before the establishment of ghettos, as well as in communities where ghettos were never established (e.g., Kraśnik). In territories occupied in the summer of 1941, *Judenräte* and ghettos were established in cities such as Vilna, whereas in other cities with large Jewish populations, such as Vinnitsa or Zaporozhe, no ghettos were established. In other locations, Jewish Councils were founded at the beginning of the occupation, but ghettos were only set up following deportations and mass shootings (such as in Żółkiew). In still other places, ghettos—considered short-term temporary holding areas for persons soon to be murdered—were administered by non-Jewish auxiliary forces rather than by a *Judenrat* (Chashniki). In the vast majority of ghettos operating in the summer of 1941, *Judenräte* existed for a very short period of time, with massacres of entire communities carried out almost immediately after the German invasion. In many other localities occupied during that period, the situation was similar: *Judenräte* were set up, sometimes only to organize forced labor and often, as the second step, to supply lists of names that would facilitate the murder of the local community. Unlike in those regions occupied by Germany in 1939 where members of the *Judenrat* were usually murdered during the final stage of deportations, in areas occupied in 1941, membership in the *Judenrat* did not guarantee even temporary protection. Indeed, in many localities, members of the *Judenrat* were the first to be killed.

4 Isaiah Trunk, *Judenrat: The Jewish Councils in Eastern Europe under Nazi Occupation* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 2.

When examining the history of the *Judenräte*, key questions usually relate to their membership, especially the motivations of their members and the pressure they were under. In the majority of cases in Eastern Europe, the *Judenrat* was built around a leader initially appointed by the local administration and later approved by Nazi officials. The leader then appointed other members of the council, who collectively acted as an advisory board and were responsible for various functions of the community. According to Heydrich's *Schnellbrief*, the *Judenrat* was to be "as far as possible composed of the remaining influential personalities and rabbis." The size of the council was set at twenty-four men, but further details about the composition of *Judenräte* were provided by Hans Frank's decree, which noted that this number applied only to communities of over ten thousand people. In less populous localities, *Judenräte* were smaller, and they included women (among others, those in Łuck, Smolensk, and Proskurov). There were also *Judenräte* with more than one leader (Kiwerc).

As a general rule, it can be claimed that the *Judenräte* established at the beginning of the occupation of Poland were mainly composed of people who were members of pre-existing systems and structures of communal leadership. While enlisting elites might have been used as a strategy to project legitimacy—that is, to strengthen the sense that a council effectively replaced old power structures and acted in the best interest of ghetto inhabitants—it also strengthened the image of the *Judenrat* as a collaborationist body, with local elites seen as having made a deal with the occupiers.

Over time and as a result of the evolutions in Nazi policy, the composition of *Judenräte* changed. *Judenräte* installed or reorganized later in the war were usually selected directly by the Germans and tended to include more members drawn from among the new elite. As one wartime testimony remarked, "Those were 'new people.'"⁵ By this time, prewar social mobility networks had already been replaced by an entirely new system.

A particular case of this dynamic may be observed in the Polish territories occupied by the Germans in mid-1941—which had already experienced the considerable destruction of Jewish communal life and institutions during the Soviet occupation—and in occupied prewar Soviet territories with no existing Jewish administrative structures. Leadership positions in those localities were often given to German-speaking

5 NN., Relacja pt. "Pł-k" [Płock], Jewish Historical Institute Archive, ARG I 965 (Ring. I/886), ARG I 725 (Ring. I/801).

refugees. Yet here, too, *Judenräte* were often headed by rabbis or other prewar community leaders (Turzysk near Kowel) or professionals. In many ghettos, the *Judenrat* was set up by those from “among wealthier Jews.”⁶

Although the appointment of the *Judenrat* was carried out by the German administration, those who joined the *Judenrat* usually retained a degree of choice. People joined the councils for various reasons, depending on their own views and the situation of their community. A key role was undoubtedly played by the initial belief that wartime “Jewish Councils” were, indeed, to be a continuation of prewar communal bodies. However, the German authorities also had the means to mobilize members of the Jewish population into their service. A key instrument at Germans’ disposal was the exemption of *Judenrat* members from forced labor. Depending on the locality, *Judenrat* members received other benefits including access to free health care, protection against the requisition of their apartments, and sometimes passes that allowed them to temporarily leave the ghetto. In the territories occupied during Operation Barbarossa, where *Judenräte* were established after the first wave of killings, which often targeted prominent members of the community, the fear of reprisals played an important part in shaping the behavior of *Judenräte* members. At the same time, because of the shifting boundaries of acceptable behavior and growing corruption, membership in the *Judenrat* and its agencies could (and for many did) become a significant source of additional income mainly due to bribes.

The initial duties of the *Judenräte* were, to a large degree, a continuation of the prewar tasks performed by the Kehilla. Gradually new tasks that had been the domain of non-Jewish municipal authorities were added to their remit. The *Judenrat* was responsible for key functions including registering the population; organizing social welfare for the local population and refugees; and coordinating food distribution, medical care, and education, as well as religious needs. These needs were pressing, and they began immediately after the *Judenrat* was established and before the ghetto was set up. For example, the *Ältestenrat* in Włoszczowa was set up in October 1939 and instantly confronted one of its greatest challenges, which was linked to the specific context of war: mass displacement.⁷ *Judenräte* often received very little advance notice about the arrival of masses of impoverished deportees in the ghetto, all of whom

6 *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933-1945*, vol. 2, 1416.

7 Korespondencja Prezydium ŻSS z Radą Żydowską i Delegaturą ŻSS we Włoszczowej, Jewish Historical Institute Archive, 211/1114.

were destitute and in dire need of food and housing as well as medical attention in order to ensure that the mass influx of persons did not lead to the outbreak of epidemics. The first census showed that already in the first month of the war, the 2,700 Jews in Włoszczowa had increased to three thousand, almost all of whom required food and lodging. The first responsibility of the *Judenrat* was, thus, social aid, and the council began organizing campaigns to collect donations from among the local community. Collecting donations was an urgent task because the Jewish Council in Włoszczowa, which was forced to pay a substantial contribution to the German authorities after the occupation, had no funds of its own. It was only after a group of representatives from the community went to Warsaw to seek assistance from the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) that the council secured additional funds to help refugees and carry out the council's other social functions.

In December 1939, the community was enlarged by another 217 Jews deported from Poznań region, mainly elderly people and women. They were placed in the local Beth Ha-midrash, a common choice that illustrated the evolution of the prewar and wartime tasks of the Jewish Council. Soon after, hundreds of people began to arrive from Łódź. As the author of a December 1939 *Judenrat* report stated, "The lack of food and fuel provisions, a hard winter, and resulting lack of transport, made this work difficult to the point that it sometimes seemed completely impossible to carry out." The situation was further complicated by an outbreak of typhus. The Jewish Council was asked to build and equip a hospital at its own expense within two days. "With an inhuman effort, we managed to carry out the full refurbishment of the building designated for the hospital. Over 24 hours, 25 beds were produced, 25 bed covers were sewn, a few hundred pieces of bedding and underwear were gathered."

In January 1940, representatives from Włoszczowa went to Warsaw again to ask for more money from the JDC. In February, 440 deportees from Włocławek arrived in the town, the vast majority of whom were ill following their torturous journey. With dwindling funds from Jewish agencies, which increasingly focused their work on the needs of the Warsaw community, the council had to tax all inhabitants of the town, leading to widespread protests and the use of force against those unwilling to pay. On July 10, 1940, the ghetto was established in Włoszczowa. The situation of local Jews became catastrophic, and with no income from donations or obligatory contributions, essentially all social work was suspended.

The establishment of the Jewish Councils created the illusion of self-government: the potential to make choices and negotiate with German

authorities. Yet, while they may have focused on the everyday needs of the community initially, *Judenräte* were established primarily as tools to facilitate the implementation of German policy in Eastern Europe and often to represent their communities to the German authorities. As Dan Diner wrote, *Judenräte* became “trapped between total subjugation and a modicum of self-organization.”⁸ The functioning of the *Judenräte* mirrored both the chaos of Nazi administration in Eastern Europe and the Jews’ lack of understanding of it. Additionally, *Judenräte* were further destabilized due to the involvement of local non-German authorities, the influence of which was strongest, it seems, in smaller towns far away from centers of German administration. While it quickly became clear that the “Jewish autonomy” promised in Nazi propaganda should be ruled out, there was still the basic question of survival, both theirs and their communities’.

Members of the *Judenrat* made decisions based on what they knew at the time. Whether they thought about the good of their community, were primarily concerned with protecting their own lives and families, or whether their actions were motivated by opportunism, they believed in the need to cooperate with the occupier, at least to some degree. Thus, attempting to deflect arbitrary measures that would harm the Jews by second-guessing German intentions and assessing the potential success of various survival strategies were responsibilities assumed by the *Judenräte* on behalf of their communities. The situation of *Judenräte* in small towns was particularly dire. They had even less access to reliable sources of information than those in large cities and towns, and they had to rely on gossip, rumors, and hearsay regarding German regulations. A document from Hrubieszów reported that its *Judenrat* found it necessary to “run from officer to officer and from official to official to uncover some bit of information [hidden] behind the curtain, but their efforts yield nothing.”⁹

A growing number of local studies, especially those related to areas occupied during Operation Barbarossa and looking beyond the large ghettos of Warsaw, Łódź, Białystok, and Vilna, show that the key to understanding the *Judenräte* is appreciating the diversity of members’ attitudes and individual motivations, as well as the influence of wartime realities: namely, the brutality of everyday life under occupation and the blurring of acceptable behavioral boundaries. It is also necessary to

8 Dan Diner, *Beyond the Conceivable: Studies on Germany, Nazism, and the Holocaust* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000).

9 NN. (Hrubieszów), List z 26. 06. 1942 r. do NN, Jewish Historical Institute Archive, ARG I 773 (Ring. I/812).

understand that the complete hopelessness of the “Jewish administration” in face of the Holocaust does not preclude studying them as groups of autonomous individuals who fulfilled their directives notwithstanding the circumstances in which they found themselves. The actions of the *Judenrat* were the result of a complex calculation of benefits and costs that individuals thought they could decipher at the time, before their full consequences could be known.