



Jeffrey S. Kopstein, Jason Wittenberg. *Intimate Violence: Anti-Jewish Pogroms on the Eve of the Holocaust.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018. Maps, graphs. 192 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-5017-1525-9.

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In their book, *Intimate Violence: Anti-Jewish Pogroms on the Eve of the Holocaust*, Jeffrey S. Kopstein and Jason Wittenberg, both political scientists, undertook the challenge of trying to determine why some communities carried out pogroms against their Jewish neighbors while others did not during the summer of 1941. As the Nazis invaded lands that had been under Soviet control following the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, residents organized pogroms against Jews throughout eastern Poland, including perhaps the most well known in Jedwabne, which was the subject of Jan Gross's 2001 book *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne*. While historians have offered a number of possible explanations for why these pogroms occurred, including revenge for alleged Jewish support and collaboration during the Soviet regime, economic competition, and high levels of antisemitism, the question of why some people chose to torture and kill their neighbors in often humiliating and brutal ways while others did not had not been sufficiently explained until now.

In their preface, Kopstein and Wittenberg explain that they wrote the book after attending a conference on the Holocaust and local contexts, which led them to wonder how the theories and approaches that social scientists have taken to ex-

plain ethnic violence might help explain these pogroms. Building on much of the literature that had previously been written on the period in Poland, as well as an array of archival materials, Kopstein and Wittenberg sought to “identify and characterize the local contexts that stimulate or inhibit ethnic violence in societies with long histories of animosity” (p. 3).

In the first chapter, they explain why the pogroms during the summer of 1941 were unique, namely, that they occurred under conditions of state collapse. Also, the pogroms were quite rare. In fact, they found that pogroms occurred in just 9 percent of the localities they studied (p. 2). To understand why the pogroms occurred in those places but not others, they introduce the “power-threat” theory, which they use to help explain their core argument: “Pogroms were most likely to break out where non-Jews perceived a Jewish threat to their political dominance” (p. 15). To ensure that the reader understands the context of this perceived threat, Kopstein and Wittenberg write, “the creation of constitutional states in east-central Europe after World War I did not resolve the Jewish question but instead displaced it onto the stage of modern politics by translating it into electoral struggles between political parties. Nowhere was this question more acute than in

the kresy [eastern Polish borderlands] of interwar Poland, a multi-national region that for the first time in almost 150 years belonged to one state” (p. 25). To further explain the context, Kopstein and Wittenberg provide a helpful overview of the various Polish, Ukrainian, and Jewish parties and their supporters. After Józef Piłsudski’s death in 1935, Poland’s politics veered to the right, and by the time the Soviets occupied the eastern borderlands in September 1939, ethnic tensions were high. The Soviet occupation, which was difficult for both Jews and non-Jews, did nothing to ease them, which helps to explain why certain conditions were in place for outbursts of violence.

Kopstein and Wittenberg’s data includes demographic information from the 1921 and 1931 censuses, electoral results from the 1922 and 1928 national parliamentary elections (after 1928, they write, the elections could not be considered free or fair), and primary and secondary sources that help them determine where pogroms occurred or did not occur. There are, of course, limits and challenges with any data set, but given the unique circumstances and general chaos of the period, it is important to note how carefully the authors work around these limits and challenges. For example, knowing that the 1921 census overcounted Poles while undercounting national minorities, they look instead at religious identification to determine nationality, since, at least for the most part, one could infer that those who identified as Roman Catholics were Polish, Orthodox were Belarusians, and Greek Catholics or Uniates were Ukrainian. Given the data they had access to, they decided to focus on six voivodships (provinces): Białystok, Polesie, Volhynia, Lwów, Stanisławów, and Tarnopol. In the northeastern provinces of Białystok and Polesie, the major national groups were Poles, Belarusians, and Jews, while the major groups in the southeastern localities were largely Ukrainians, Poles, and Jews.

The heart of the book is the fourth and fifth chapters where Kopstein and Wittenberg test

their arguments for both the northeastern and southeastern provinces. Admittedly, quantitative methodology can be a bit confusing for those not trained in the social sciences. However, Kopstein and Wittenberg do a phenomenal job summarizing their results in ways that help nonspecialists understand their implications. In the northeastern provinces, they looked at 352 localities. The places where pogroms occurred had more than ten times as many Jewish inhabitants as places without pogroms. The Jews in those places were also more likely to be Jewish nationalists. The data reveals that the more common explanations for why pogroms occurred at this time (revenge for collaboration during the Soviet regime, economic competition, and antisemitism) do not sufficiently explain why pogroms occurred in the places they did. In fact, they note an important paradox: “Given the strength of anti-Semitic nationalism in much of northeast Poland and the highly permissive conditions provided by the Nazi invasion, our analysis paradoxically shows that it was extraordinarily difficult to start a pogrom and actually required very little to prevent them” (p. 83). Ultimately, because the Jews had not been successfully integrated into Poland and so many Jews chose Jewish nationalist parties in hopes of receiving the same rights as their neighbors, the Jews were viewed as a potential threat. Thus, they conclude, in places where this perceived threat seemed stronger, pogroms were more likely to occur. Similarly, in the southeastern provinces, where they looked at 1,943 localities, the best predictor of whether a pogrom would occur or not was the strength of the Zionist parties. In places with small Jewish populations, the Zionists did not invest much time in recruiting supporters, which meant that in many places with small Jewish populations, the local Jews were more politically integrated, and therefore, they were seen as less of a threat.

Based on the models they created, they determined that the best predictors that a pogrom would occur in any given place were the number

of Jews (in terms of both relative number and proportion of the population), the number of Jews advocating for national equality with their non-Jewish neighbors, and the popularity of non-Jewish parties advocating for national equality (for example, Piłsudski's *Bezpartyjny Blok Współpracy z Rządem*, or BBWR). This is an important revision to the typical explanations given for these pogroms: "Economic tensions, anti-Semitic nationalism, and the legacy of the Soviet occupation are not absent, but even when they do play a role, it is in addition to rather than to the exclusion of the effect of Jewish nationalism" (p. 113).

Kopstein and Wittenberg conclude that *Jedwabne* was quite different from most of the other pogroms in the Białystok voivodship. It was far more politically polarized than other places in the area, which, they argue, may account for the extreme brutality in *Jedwabne*. Also, unlike the other localities in the region, there were no Belarussians living there, which meant that ethnic competition was really between Poles and Jews. This is an important contribution, as *Jedwabne* has become so representative of the pogroms in that period. The authors also suggest paths for future research. They include a chapter that questions whether their findings can help explain other instances of neighbor on neighbor violence, during both the Holocaust and other instances of intercommunal violence, such as those in India and the postbellum American South. This chapter leaves more questions than answers, and it will be interesting to see how their research contributes to subsequent studies of intercommunal violence. Furthermore, they offer a brief discussion in the conclusion about the implications that their research has on important debates concerning the politics of memory and collective guilt, anti-Semitism in Poland, and the relationship between cultural differences and ethnic conflict. Though it is a short book, it is filled with important findings and questions for future scholars in all disciplines

of Polish studies, as well as those studying ethnic conflicts beyond Poland, to consider.

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