



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.

Reviewed by Polly Zavadvker (University of Delaware)

Published on H-Judaic (July, 2020)

Commissioned by Barbara Krawcowicz (Jagiellonian University)

When it was published in 2001, Jan Gross's *Neighbors* cast a glaring spotlight on the town of Jedwabne, where on July 10, 1941, Polish residents massacred several hundreds of their Jewish neighbors. The book launched a flurry of scholarship and heated debates both in Poland and abroad. And yet even before its appearance, it was widely known that Poles and Ukrainians had carried out hundreds of other anti-Jewish pogroms throughout eastern Poland at roughly the same time.

The political scientists Jeffrey Kopstein and Jason Wittenberg make two major contributions in this concise volume: first, they are the first English-speaking scholars to attempt to locate the Jedwabne pogrom in its temporal and regional context. Their subject is the wave of "intimate violence" from June to August 1941, when Polish and Ukrainian residents killed their Jewish neighbors in the streets, homes, and buildings of the towns they shared, using readily handy kitchen and gardening tools as weapons. The book leaves no room for doubt that what happened in Jedwabne happened in hundreds of other places, or that the hundreds of Jewish victims there numbered among tens of thousands elsewhere in eastern Poland.

Second, the book offers an initial attempt to not only describe what happened during the pogroms but to explain why it happened. As politi-

cal scientists they attempt to model the process of ethnic violence: they measure the relative significance of preexisting conditions as well as immediate triggers and identify the factor that they believe decisively predicted the outcome of pogroms. The study is not without significant flaws, of which more below, but these two contributions alone represent important strides for both the social sciences and Holocaust studies.

In chapter 1 we are introduced to the study's key question, theoretical framework, data, and findings. Pogroms occurred in some 227 cities throughout six voivodships (administrative regions) of eastern Poland, over roughly six weeks from late June to early August 1941. That number seems enormous in absolute terms, but actually represents only 9 percent of cities with sizeable Jewish communities for the region as a whole. The overwhelming majority of places where Jews lived alongside Poles and Ukrainians did not experience a pogrom. Why did pogroms break out in those places where they did, and not in others?

Kopstein and Wittenberg handily put aside previous explanations, pointing first to what they think *did not* cause the violence. Poles were *not* following German orders, as some argued, but rather, acted with total agency. The timing was all-important: the Soviet occupation of eastern Poland had

already collapsed and German forces had entered, but not yet established a state regime. The presence alone of the SS provided an opportune moment for Poles to freely act on their desires without fear of punishment or retribution. The authors also address previously posited motives of revenge, antisemitism, and greed. Yes, they argue, desire to avenge the Jews' alleged collaboration with Soviet occupiers played some part in fueling the violence and helped to "set the stage" for neighbor-on-neighbor violence, but was not its driving cause (p. 42). Similarly, Poles' greed for Jewish property, with theft widely documented during and after the pogroms, should be read as a symptom and not cause of the pogrom. Finally, they reject the "antisemitism hypothesis," arguing that if timeless, or "ubiquitous hatred" for Jews had existed among Poles from time immemorial, then one would expect far more pogroms than actually occurred (p. 10).

Having cleared the way of what factors did *not* cause the pogroms, the authors explain: "Poles that turned against their Jewish neighbors were motivated less by hatred, revenge, or avarice than by a perception of a threat to their political dominance" (p. 58). Wherever Poles felt that sense of threat, they "were more likely to give into the temptation to commit violence, more tolerant of others committing violence, and less likely to come to the aid of the victims" (p. 71).

They draw here on "power threat theory," developed by the sociologist Hubert M. Blalock to analyze the dynamics of race relations in postbellum United States.[1] Blalock argued that wherever southern whites perceived acute threat from blacks to their continued racial dominance (the presence of large black populations combined with strong influence of racially inclusive political parties), they carried out "vigilante justice" with intent to preserve the racial status quo: from supporting electoral disenfranchisement and Jim Crow laws to the perpetration of widespread

lynching, the counterpart of which Kopstein and Wittenberg find in the pogroms.

Chapters 2 and 3 provide a historical and demographic overview of the region. In order to measure the "perception of threat" to which Poles reacted with violence in 1941, the authors attempt to quantify three factors, all rooted in the prewar period: first, voting patterns, records of which exist for parliamentary elections of 1922 and 1928. In cities where pogroms took place, they found that Jews voted in high numbers for Jewish nationalist parties, and specifically the General Zionists, who as part of the Minorities Bloc issued aggressive and unequivocal demands for Jewish political autonomy and full equality. Conversely, in cities that saw violence, majorities of Poles supported the right-wing nationalist party (the National Democrats, or "Endecja"), which advocated a platform of fanatical patriotism, religiosity, opposition to full equality for non-Polish minorities; in a telling detail, we are told that some of its members viewed the Zionist leader Yitzhak Grunbaum as "fundamentally anti-Polish" in outlook (p. 63). Second, pogroms were likelier in cities with large Jewish populations (Jews were 10 percent of the total population in eastern Poland but about half of all urban dwellers), suggesting that Poles turned on their neighbors in places where they felt outnumbered. Finally, the authors factor in the existence of Jewish Free Loan Societies in cities where pogroms occurred, hypothesizing that Poles would have perceived credit aid to Jewish businesses as posing an unfair, and hence threatening advantage.

Chapter 4, "Beyond Jedwabne," is the literal and conceptual center of the book, where the statistical method is explained and applied to local histories. With forceful clarity we see that in locations where Zionists dominated Jewish politics and the Endecja had majority-Polish support, violence erupted in 1941. In Radzilow, the site of one of the most deadly and brutal pogroms in the region, "virtually every eligible Jewish voter voted for Jewish parties in 1928 and 42 percent of the Polish elec-

torate supported the Endecja in the same election” (p. 78). Conversely in Białystok, there was no pogrom, for despite a sizeable Jewish population and history of Christian antisemitism, Jews had voted in large numbers for minority-friendly Polish parties in 1928.

The most important point Kopstein and Wittenberg make in this central chapter, I believe, is to suggest that political behavior spills over into subjective experience. How one votes has consequences insofar as it suggests a mentality and worldview, in this case regarding the role of the state, economic redistribution, and the limits of minority rights. They do not suggest that Polish pogrom perpetrators had a “precise electoral calculation in mind,” but rather that the social distance between Poles and Jews had grown so great over the previous two decades that “even the bare minimum of solidarity between the two communities was absent” (p. 78). While political integration did not necessarily equate with the “thick solidarity of a nation,” it may have provided at the local level “just enough communal cohesion, the bare minimum, to prevent the worst sort of deprivations when all other factors pointed in that direction” (p. 78). What the gradual process of political polarization produced, most fatefully, in their view, was *indifference* among a majority of Poles toward the lives and fates of their Jewish neighbors once the pogrom began. The survivor narratives they cite confirm this with chilling effect.

Initially the authors’ use of data struck me as implausible. Could an ethnic group’s voting patterns in 1928 really be used to predict whether they would brutalize (or conversely, fall victim to) their neighbors thirteen years later, under the “right” set of circumstances? This is one question that animated a book forum discussion among a group of historians and political scientists in the *Journal of Genocide Research* earlier this year.[2] In the interest of drawing on that important exchange, I will transition here from review to meta-review.

If a consensus might be gleaned from among the forum’s scholars, it is that the Kopstein and Wittenberg asked the right questions but were unable to adequately answer them with the existing data. The historian Kamil Kijek of the University of Wrocław took the strongest exception to their use of data. He found especially problematic the authors’ definition of antisemitism, which they understand as a practice rooted in political behavior, ignoring the long history and psycho-cultural dimensions of Polish-Jewish relations to which historians more generally attend. Kijek was morally troubled, too, by the argument that the Jews’ turn to nationalism in the 20s and 30s played a causative role in the violence they suffered in 1941. By making this claim, “the authors attribute the main causes of violence to the Jews themselves.”[3] While I agree that the discussion of antisemitism is thin in this study, the latter charge is not entirely fair. The authors explicitly rebuke the notion that any blame for political polarization lies with Jews; rather, they claim it represents “the failure of the Polish state to integrate its Jewish citizens” (p. 83).

Yet while they do not fault Jews for choosing nationalist politics in interwar Poland, the authors do suggest in a concluding chapter that minorities can do their part to avert “intimate violence” by practicing political integration and communal cohesion—specifically by tempering their demands of the state and working toward shared, common interests with majority populations. As a counterpoint to this suggestion, Evgeny Finkel suggests that the prospect of political integration for Jews depended on geography. While in the northern part of the region (e.g., Białystok province) Jews could “achieve a degree of local acceptance by moderating their claims and supporting the Polish state-building project,” in the south, where the brutal Radivilov pogrom occurred, and where Jews lived among Poles and Ukrainians, Jews simply could not make friends without simultaneously making enemies. Jewish support for either Poles or Ukrainians “inevitably alienated the other; neu-

trality was seen by both as treason,” and thus, “Jewish communities were placed between the Polish rock and the Ukrainian hard place and suffered as a result.”[4]

As a final and perhaps minor point I would add that the style and tone of this book can be alienating at times. To cite just one grievous example: early in the book the authors explain that they chose to study the 1941 pogroms because they offered examples of true unbridled popular violence, at a time when political conditions allowed for Polish civilians to attack Jews in the absence of restraint. These pogroms, they write, are thus “*ideal circumstances* under which to examine the structural characteristics of localities where pogroms occur” (p. 17, emphasis added). This begs to be rephrased with attention to the insensitive choice of adjective.

It has been pointed out that Raul Hilberg, a pioneering Holocaust researcher in the 1950s, was a political scientist; one could add that his contemporary Hannah Arendt approached this history as a political thinker. As it were, Kopstein and Wittenberg have helped to launch a second and now burgeoning wave of social scientific studies of the Holocaust. It is hoped that future scholars who build on their pioneering work will more sensitively attend to the “thick” culture and history of Slavic-Jewish relations, and without sacrificing feeling for rigor.

Polly Zavadivker is an assistant professor of history and Jewish studies at the University of Delaware.

Notes

[1]. *Toward a Theory of Minority-Group Relations* (New York: John Wiley, 1967).

[2]. With contributions from Tomasz Frydel, Evgeny Finkel, Sanjeevini Badigar Lokhande, Anna Shternshis, Keely Stauter-Halsted, and Kamil Kijek, in *Journal for Genocide Research* 22, no. 2 (2020): 280-315.

[3]. Kamil Kijek, “On the Pitfalls of Operationalization and Scholarly Hubris in the Study of Anti-Jewish Pogroms in Eastern Europe on the Eve of the Holocaust,” *ibid.*: 302.

[4]. Evgeny Finkel, “Votes and Pogroms: The Electoral Politics of Anti-Jewish Violence,” *ibid.*: 286.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-judaic>

Citation: Polly Zavadviker. Review of Kopstein, Jeffrey S.; Wittenberg, Jason. *Intimate Violence: Anti-Jewish Pogroms on the Eve of the Holocaust*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. July, 2020.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=54544>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.