

# Stranger Lands: Politics, Ethnicity, and Occupation on the Eastern Front, 1914-1918

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*This seminar paper seeks to reconstruct how ethnic politics and inter-communal relations in Eastern Europe during World War I were central to the war's conduct and legacy. Examining different popular and institutional understandings of ethnicity in the Russian and German Empires prior to 1914 and during the war proved to be key to understanding the breakdown of relations between occupying Germans, local nationalists, and Jewish communities, paving the way for the contentious ethnic politics of interwar Europe, which in-turn played a key role in driving Europe towards the destruction of World War II.*

FOR THE FIRST HALF OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, the northeastern corner of Europe, encompassing all or much of the Baltic States, Poland, and Belarus, was the scene of almost continuous political upheaval. Tucked in the contested borderlands between Germany and Russia, the two powers at either end of the territories sought to claim and remake these lands as a critical component of their respective state ideologies and expansionist designs. In the name of achieving their aims by any means necessary, both German and Russian policies unleashed a potent cocktail upon the inhabitants of the region, mixing radical nineteenth century political thought with twentieth century weaponry and timeless ethnic animosities, radicalizing the politics of the region along ethnic lines.

The end of the Cold War and the opening of archives in post-Soviet states have created opportunities for scholars to research and understand the origins of the ethno-political violence that engulfed Eastern Europe throughout this period. However, most of the research has been devoted to studying the political conditions and ethnic tensions that paved the way for the almost unprecedented ethnic cleansing campaigns that rocked the region during the 1930s and 1940s. This focus, as defined most explicitly in Tim Snyder's acclaimed *Bloodlands*, presents a valuable contribution to understanding the nature of the violence that engulfed Eastern Europe during this period – but it does not adequately explain the political, social, and intellectual origins of this mass bloodletting, especially in terms of its disproportionate impact on Eastern European Jewry (Ostjuden).<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, the political, social, and cultural milieu that shaped interwar Eastern Europe and defined the tensions that would explode in ethnic cleansing from 1939-1945 was the offspring of the interactions between Germans, Jews, Balts and Slavs during World War I. These interactions in the borderlands of Poland, Belarus, Lithuania, and Latvia took place against the backdrop of the German occupation of the collapsing Russian Empire's northwest corner, and were shaped by the experience of occupation, deportation, and re-drawing of borders. It was from this chaos that the radicalism and systematic violence that came to

characterize the subsequent history of Eastern Europe during the twentieth century emerged, soon giving rise to new and ever more destructive forms of despotism and barbarism.

As new scholarship on the ethnic politics that drove World War I has come to light, the importance of understanding pre-1914 conceptions of ethnicity in both Imperial German and Russian society and how these conceptions drove wartime policy has become a critical component for understanding the nature of the war itself, particularly in the context of its medium-to-long-term consequences. On a fundamental level, my core objective is to understand how these earlier preconceptions, which have been hashed out most ambitiously in the work of Vejas Gabriel Liulevicius of the University of Tennessee, clashed with the complicated and harsh realities of a drawn-out and destructive war and in its chaotic aftermath, which unleashed a potent cocktail of frustrations and prejudices that spilled over into an even more disastrous conflict two decades later.

The 1905 Russian Revolution was a watershed moment in European politics, whose legacy provided the foundation for the ethnic and political tensions that Imperial Germany came into intimate contact with as an occupying force in the East during the First World War.<sup>2</sup> The 1905 revolt against the reactionary government of Nicholas II presented itself as a political and economic uprising by non-Russian ethnic nationalists, Social Democrats, and liberals against the Baltic German and ethnic Russian political and economic elites at the top of the Empire's social hierarchy.<sup>3</sup>

In one of the most potent episodes of ethnic-tinged political violence in 1905, Jewish Bundists (Socialists) in Latvia, through which the Eastern Front would slice during most of World War I, joined forces with Latvian Social Democrats to strike against the power of ethnic Russian and Baltic German officials and aristocrats.<sup>4</sup> As protests took the form of violent demonstrations in urban areas and staged burnings of Baltic Germans' "baronial estates," Social Democrats, Marxists, Latvian nationalists, and liberals echoed the demands of other opposition parties throughout the empire as they called for greater national autonomy, an end to tsarist absolutism, and the abolition of de-facto serfdom that entrenched the power of Russian and Baltic German interests.<sup>5</sup>

Although squashed by Tsar Nicholas' generals, the 1905 Revolution divided the heterogeneous societies of the northwestern Russian Empire among ethnic lines, fueling a culture of resentment and political radicalism that exploded after 1914. Moreover, in the 1905 Revolution's aftermath, the Russian state, especially its army, redoubled its existing obsession with ethnicity, classifying nationalities as either reliable or unreliable in their faithfulness to the nation and planting the seeds for a forthcoming campaign of ethnic cleansings.<sup>6</sup>

At the outbreak of World War I, less than a decade later, German bureaucrats, military planners, and ordinary soldiers came to project all their existing fears, anxieties, and prejudices onto a conflict in the East that they were woefully unprepared to fight and even less prepared

to be victorious in. To most Germans, the War in the East was perceived as more than merely a war of conquest for a land that many Germans saw as dirty, underdeveloped and enveloped in anarchy. Indeed, to many Germans, the War in the East also took on the dimension of being a war of liberation, although the kind of liberation that was being sought varied enormously across diverse of German society. For the German Left, war against tsarism was a war for Europe's liberation from the armory of its reactionary and absolutist elements.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, for the country's conservatives, war with Imperial Russia meant a war for the liberation of the Baltic Germans from foreign rule and even more consequentially, of the German nation through the realization of its expansionist destiny.<sup>8</sup> Above all, for Germany's political elites, war with Russia meant the Kaiserreich's liberation from an omnipresent political and military foe, whose pan-Slavist ideology and designs for homogeneity in Eastern and Central Europe represented a direct challenge to German geopolitical ambitions and security.<sup>9</sup>

These conceptions blended with a broad ignorance about the true nature of the political and ethnic conditions of the East, as most Germans, including most senior officials, did not recognize the intense ethnic diversity of the lands they would soon be occupying, believing all its inhabitants to be "vaguely Russian in character" and resembling long-established stereotypes about Poles from East Prussia.<sup>10</sup> As General Erich Ludendorff himself commented, he and his soldiers "knew little of the conditions of the land and people [Land und Leute] and looked out on a new world" upon crossing the historic German-Russian frontier.<sup>11</sup>



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From the war's earliest days, the German forces' confused to non-existent understanding of the political and strategic role of ethnicity in the East clashed with the Russians' obsession with it. During the brief Russian occupations of East Prussia in late 1914 and early 1915, tsarist troops systematically targeted ethnic German civilians in some of the earliest atrocities of the war, killing at least 1,491 people, raping hundreds more, and taking nearly 13,000 people (almost half of them women and children) hostage to the Russian interior, nearly a third of whom died in captivity.<sup>12</sup>

In the tsarist army's eyes, first and foremost among the suspect nationalities, other than ethnic Germans, were Jews. Russians officials' decision to target Jewish civilians was driven as much by a fear of potential Jewish affinity for the Germans, stemming from linguistic similarities between Yiddish and German, as it was by a core belief that Jews were a foreign and hostile social element, whose very presence near the frontlines presented a threat to the tsarist army's ability to successfully wage war. This explicitly racialized conceptualization of violence against civilians, which tsarist forces were the most deliberate in developing during the First World War, served no military purposes whatsoever, but it did succeed in

fundamentally changing the ethno-political landscape of Eastern Europe.<sup>13</sup>

As the war progressed, tsarist officials' abuse of their almost unchecked power over civilians intensified as their means of acting on their pervasive fear of spies changed. Part and parcel of the Russian military's scorched-earth tactics, Russian commanders sought to foment chaos in areas proximate to the front, confusing the German troops upon their capture of depopulated towns and villages and depriving them of human and physical capital that could be used to further the Kaiserreich's war aims. In hastily organized and poorly planned mass deportations, which peaked in April-October 1915, the Russian army ordered the expulsion of "all Jews and suspect individuals" from points near the front lines.<sup>14</sup> In the Kovno province, nearly 150,000 Jews were deported within two weeks in May 1915, while Kurland, in what is now Western Latvia, saw the deportation of 26,000 Jews by early June 1915 as Russian commanders sought to "cleanse" their fiefdoms of the "unreliable element."<sup>15</sup>

Concurrently, Russian Army commanders in the Dvinsk and Kovno districts were establishing clear policies for the taking of hostages and carefully drawing up lists that targeted "the most influential members of the [Jewish] community, including Rabbis."<sup>16</sup> The area's depopulation extended much further than the deportations of Jews, as millions of both "reliable" and "unreliable" subjects retreated to the Russian interior (some voluntarily and some by force) while other groups of "unreliables," such as Lithuanian Lutherans and over 200,000 ethnic Germans from Russian Poland and Ukraine, also faced mass deportations and atrocities.<sup>17</sup> Boxcars transporting vulnerable ethnic minorities to the hinterlands of an unapologetically racist, reactionary empire first appeared on the rail tracks of Eastern Europe during the tsarist deportations of 1914-15. These horrors represented one of the earliest modernized, systematic, and forced mass movements of people in the region on explicitly ethnic terms – a phenomenon that Eastern Europeans would come to experience many more times throughout the coming century.

The depopulated and destabilized lands where German troops arrived as an occupying force created an impression that would color their subsequent attitudes towards "East," exacerbate the problems of administering it, and lay the groundwork for far-reaching historical consequences. The German victory in the February 1915 Winter Battle of Masuria ended the Russian presence in East Prussia for the duration of the war.<sup>18</sup> From that point onwards, the entirety of the northeastern front snaked through pre-war Russian territories, running through towns bearing different names in Russian, Polish, Yiddish, and at least one more tongue – encompassing a massive, underdeveloped, and sparsely populated area.<sup>19</sup> German troops rapidly concluded that the East was rife with *Unkultur*, defined as "the sheer absence of culture," as one lieutenant wrote of "deepest Russia, without a trace of central European culture, Asia, steppe, swamp, spaceless underworld, and a godforsaken slime-desert."<sup>20</sup> This mixture of physical and cultural chaos presented a stark contrast to the uniformity that they had earlier perceived, thus encouraging Germans to take on attitudes that mixed derision with curiosity.<sup>21</sup>

Throughout their occupation of the East, Imperial German officials sought to Germanize the newly acquired territories, building on already-existing East Prussian policies designed to coercively assimilate ethnic Poles and encourage German settlement along the frontier.<sup>22</sup> At its core, German policy aimed to bind the peoples of the occupied East, who were seen through a paternalistic lens as lacking the skills and culture for self-governance, into economic and cultural, and hence political, dependency on the Kaiserreich.

For German planners, the proverbial low-hanging-fruit of the occupied territories were the Ostjuden, who could communicate far more readily with German troops and officials than their Slavic or Baltic neighbors because of the relative intelligibility between German and Yiddish, and whose longstanding persecution under Russian rule initially endeared them to German troops as a liberating force. General Ludendorf himself considered the Ostjuden “indispensable” to a successful occupation, and German military planners and bureaucrats would exert much effort into crafting policies that placed Ostjuden at the center of German efforts to control and develop the occupied East.<sup>23</sup> This relationship was not driven by benevolence or Judeophile sensibilities, but by German officials’ pragmatic interests in securing the region for later colonization and development, as well as their pervasive ideology of cultural imperialism and superiority. However, the intimate interactions between the Ostjuden and their German overlords during the occupation would play a definitive role for decades to come in the intertwined histories of Germany and Eastern Europe.

German policy towards the Ostjuden was largely developed in coordination between the Office of Jewish Affairs and the Propaganda Department, both housed in the Kaiserreich’s Foreign Office, and the German High Command in the East, whose thirteen Army rabbis and nearly 40,000 German Jewish soldiers played critical roles in the effort to create “positive working relationships with the local Jewish communities.”<sup>24</sup> In the months and years to come, the Foreign Ministry would coordinate with German civilian relief agencies to direct resources (largely funded by American Jews) towards hundreds of thousands of destitute Ostjuden under German occupation while developing close relationships with the Jewish Emergency Committee for Poland and Lithuania and the Committee for the Liberation of Russian Jewry.<sup>25</sup> German bureaucrats and the Army Rabbis worked in tandem to provide healthcare and education to Jewish communities throughout the occupied East, as the German administration encouraged secular education for Jewish boys and girls in the region, endorsed dialogue between Polish Jews and their Catholic neighbors, and encouraged rabbis to advocate for German political positions in their sermons.<sup>26</sup>

However, from the outset, German policies in the East were inherently self-contradictory, undermining the aim of creating “client nationalities” that embraced German material and political culture.<sup>27</sup> On the one hand, the “German Work “(Deutsche Arbeit) initiative saw the army devoting “astonishing effort in time of war to cultural improvement behind the front: newspapers in native languages, publication of dictionaries, folk museums, school regulations, archeological and historical investigations, and theater.”<sup>28</sup> Yet, on the other hand, the Deutsche Arbeit policy was rather transparently organized to serve German war

aims by manipulating local ethno-political dynamics, particularly to create a bulwark against Polish cultural dominance and national aspirations. This included the deliberate fostering of Belarusian (White Ruthenian) culture, a nationality that was previously “invisible” to the German army, and the German promotion of Lithuanian culture and political aspirations as a buffer against the potential Polish ethno-political encirclement of East Prussia.<sup>29</sup> Concurrently, the Verkherspolitik policy, which sought to grant the German military complete control over economic activity and movement in the occupied territories — involving the requisitioning of forced labor, harvests, and livestock, as well as the establishment of a “regime of passes, censuses, and bans on movement,” fueled an anti-German resentment throughout the occupied territories that transcended ethnic divides.<sup>30</sup>

For the most part, German Jews’ interaction with the Ostjuden made them even more sensitive to their established identity as “Germans of the Mosaic confession.”<sup>31</sup> Some, like writer Arnold Zweig, came to admire “the authenticity of the Ostjuden” while others shared the sentiments of German-Jewish diarist Viktor Klemperer, who wrote that after his encounter with the Ostjuden he “thanked his creator for being a German.”<sup>32</sup> Klemperer’s views, which were reflective of the growing disdain and frustrations shown by all groups in the complicated ethnic politics of the occupied East, marked the beginning of the end of the alliance between Germany and the Ostjuden. Driven by a combination of factors, by late 1916 and early 1917 Germany’s attempt to bring stability to the East through cultural and economic imperialism would collapse spectacularly – with dire consequences for all involved.



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As wartime conditions deteriorated, anti-Semitic sentiments blossomed in the German homeland, ultimately leading to the infamous “Jew count” of October 1916 and the end of German policies encouraging Jewish cultural and humanitarian development in the East.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, behind the front lines of the occupied East, locals across ethnic lines came to view the German occupation as “even worse than Russian rule” as the East experienced chronic shortages of food and medical supplies, massive epidemics of disease, and a complete breakdown of law and order that made living conditions truly unbearable.<sup>34</sup> German troops responded to the exacerbated chaos by descending to anti-Semitic stereotypes that conflated the Ostjuden with the poverty, disorder, and disease – defining the East as decisively un-German. Against this same backdrop, Poles, Lithuanians, Latvians, Belarussians, and Ukrainians found themselves emboldened by Germany’s deteriorating position in the West as well as the Russian collapse of early 1917, and soon began to press the case for their national ambitions, thus putting them on a collision course with each other, German forces, and more often than not, local Jewish communities as well.

By the war's final months, even in the aftermath of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk and Russia's exit from the war, German troops in the East found themselves surrounded by a landscape that was even more chaotic than the one they had entered in 1914 and 1915. The experience of occupation served to fundamentally radicalize the political dimensions of ethnicity in the East, as different nationalities began to present overlapping claims for territory and cultural dominance while the German position in the region crumbled. The botched and increasingly repressive German occupation regime fomented viscerally anti-German and anti-Semitic sentiments among local ethnic nationalists who, during the course of the war, came to see the Ostjuden as "pawns of the Germans," even after the German abandonment of the Ostjuden in 1916-17.<sup>55</sup> Amidst these policy changes, the Kaiserreich sought to develop new alliances with other ethnic groups due to increasingly vocal anti-Semitic incitement among German political and military elites, rooted in a fear of Jewish Bolshevism and disloyalty despite all the evidence to the contrary.<sup>56</sup> But perhaps the most enduring and fateful legacy of the occupation in the East was the intellectual imprint it left behind on the German soldiers who served there. Driven by their initial ignorance and the official position of their commanders that emphasized the "lack of culture" among the inhabitants of the occupied area, German troops came to see the peoples of the East (especially the Ostjuden), as fundamentally inferior and associated with squalor, poverty, and chaos, and their homeland as a tabula rasa that needed to be remolded and altered – a task that they set out to complete barely twenty-one years later.

## NOTES

1. Tim Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).
2. Vejas Gabriel Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 7.
3. Andrew Ezerгалis, *The Holocaust in Latvia 1941-1944: The Missing Center* (Riga, The Historical Institute of Latvia, 1996), 37, 64.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Alexander Watson, "Unheard-of Brutality: Russian Atrocities against Civilians in East Prussia, 1914-1915," *The Journal of Modern History* 86 (December 2014), 798.
7. Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front*, 22-3.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid., 22, 25
11. Ibid., 22.
12. Watson, "Unheard-of Brutality," 822-3.
13. Ibid.
14. Eric Lohr, "The Russian Army and the Jews: Mass Deportation, Hostages, and Violence during World War I," *The Russian Review* 60, no.3 (July 2001), 410-12.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Peter Gatrell, *A Whole Empire Walking: Refugees in Russia During World War I* (Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1999), 23; Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front*, 20, 33.
18. Vejas Gabriel Liulevicius, *The German Myth of the East* (Oxford University Press: New York, 2009), 132..
19. Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front*, 6.
20. Liulevicius, *The German Myth of the East*, 137.
21. Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front*, 22.
22. Gregor Thum, *Megalomania and Angst: The Nineteenth-Century Mythicization of Germany's Eastern Borderlands in Shatterzone of Empires*, ed. Omer Bartov and Eric D. Weitz (Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 2012).
23. Tracey Hayes Norrell, "Shattered Communities: Soldiers, Rabbis, and the Ostjuden under German Occupation: 1915-1918" (PhD diss., University of Tennessee, 2010), 2.
24. Ibid., 8.
25. Ibid., 9-10.
26. Hayes Norrell, "Shattered Communities," 9-11.
27. Liulevicius, *German Myth of the East*, 139.
28. Ibid.
29. Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front*, 121, 127.
30. Liulevicius, *German Myth of the East*, 139.
31. Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front*, 41.
32. Liulevicius, *German Myth of the East*, 140.
33. Hayes Norrell, "Shattered Communities," 13.
34. Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front*, 180.
35. Hayes Norrell, "Shattered Communities," 170.
36. Ibid., 168-170, 239.

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