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אוניברסיטת חיפה
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جامعة حيفا

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Referat paper on the topic:
**“The Participation of the 1st Russian National SS Brigade ‘Druzhina’ in the
Implementation of the Final Solution in Belarus (1942-1943)”**

Student: Aleksandr Romashkov (Cohort 14; Student ID: 347552499)

Course: The Final Solution

Instructor: Dr. David Silberklang

On the eve of the German invasion of the Soviet Union, more than 800,000 Jews lived in the territory of the Byelorussian SSR¹. This territory subsequently became one of the key sites in Eastern Europe where the Nazis and their collaborators implemented the “Final Solution to the Jewish Question.” In addition, Belarus, with its extensive forests, became a major center of partisan resistance, to which the Germans responded with a brutal anti-partisan campaign.

Genocidal policies in Belarus were carried out not only by German SS Einsatzgruppen, the Security Police (Sipo), the SD, and the Order Police (Orpo), but also with the active participation of auxiliary units (Schutzmannschaften) formed from local populations and Soviet prisoners of war². Among the least researched and represented in studies on the Holocaust in Belarus is the 1st Russian National SS Brigade “Druzhina,” consisting mainly of Soviet POW officers.

In English-language historiography, this topic has received limited attention. Key works include the studies by Dalling and Mavrogordato (1957) and the work by A. J. Muñoz (2000). In Russian-language scholarship, D. Zhukov and I. Kovtun have made significant contributions, with their research based on a broad range of sources. The studies of these authors provide an invaluable source of material that allows us to reconstruct not only the structure of the formation but also the nature of its involvement in violence.

The study of collaborationist units raises fundamental questions about their degree of autonomy: were they merely instruments of German policy, or did they exercise initiative? A key complication lies in the fact that so-called “anti-partisan operations” frequently amounted

¹ Michael David-Fox, Peter Holquist, and Alexander M. Martin, eds., *The Holocaust in the East: Local Perpetrators and Soviet Responses* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2014), 204.

² Martin Dean, “Local Police Organizations in Belorussia and Ukraine,” and Yitzhak Arad, “The Killing Actions in Ostland and the Grodno-Volkovysk Region (Generalbezirk Bialystok), Generalkommissariat Belorussia,” in *The Holocaust in the East: Local Perpetrators and Soviet Responses*, ed. Michael David-Fox, Peter Holquist, and Alexander M. Martin (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2014).

to punitive operations against civilians, particularly Jews. At the same time, German authorities sought to implicate collaborators in violence in order to secure their loyalty.

This paper examines the following question: What were the forms, functions, and extent of participation and initiative of the 1st Russian National SS Brigade "Druzhina" in the implementation of the Final Solution in Belarus in 1942-1943? The chosen time frame corresponds to the period of the brigade's existence: from its creation in June 1942 from among Soviet POWs under the leadership of Red Army Lieutenant Colonel Vladimir Gil (acting under the pseudonym "Rodionov") to the end of its activities and its defection to the USSR in August 1943.

This paper provides a brief overview of the formation of the "Druzhina" and its personnel. It then analyzes the forms and functions of its participation in anti-Jewish violence, including specific operations. Finally, it assesses the extent to which the brigade, while formally subordinated to German command, demonstrated initiative within the framework of occupation policy.

In preparation for Operation Barbarossa, the Nazi leadership established a legal framework that legitimized mass violence in the occupied territories. As early as May 13, 1941, a directive was issued by Wilhelm Keitel, Chief of the Wehrmacht High Command, exempting German military personnel from liability for crimes against the civilian population on the Soviet front, while crimes committed by "enemy civilians" did not require a trial for sentencing. The "merciless destruction" of partisans and the principle of collective punishment against communities suspected of having ties to partisans were proclaimed³.

³ Adolf Hitler and Wilhelm Keitel, "Cover Letter and Fuehrer Decree on the Application of Martial Law in Territory to Be Occupied in the Eastern Campaign," June 17, 1941, *Nuremberg Trials Project*, Harvard Law School Library, Document C-50 (Prosecution Exhibit 554), <https://nuremberg.law.harvard.edu/documents/451815-cover-letter-and-fuehrer>.

This would later manifest itself in the creation of “dead zones” around villages and towns where anti-fascist partisans were active, while the population itself was either exterminated by the Nazis or deported to work in Germany.

A few days later, on May 19, 1941, Keitel issued a directive noting the existential threat that Bolshevism posed to Nazi Germany and proclaiming a ruthless struggle against this ideology and its adherents, in which Jews were equated with partisans and Bolshevik provocateurs⁴. This document reflected the incorporation of the Nazi “Judeo-Bolshevik conspiracy” into official policy and marked a step toward the systematic mass murder of Jews. Within this framework, Jews were constructed as an existential threat to the Nazi state.

Following the launch of Operation Barbarossa, Reinhard Heydrich, Chief of the RSHA, signed a special directive on July 2, 1941, addressed to the heads of the SS and police in the occupied territories of the USSR. It institutionalized the “extermination” in the occupied territories of saboteurs, propagandists, trade union leaders, Comintern officials, active party members, as well as Jewish party members and Jews employed in the civil service⁵. Thus, among all the peoples of the USSR, only Jewish party members and officials were doomed to an inevitable death on the basis of their origin.

Later, after the German invasion of the USSR had begun and mass executions of Jews were underway, on October 10, 1941, Field Marshal Walter von Reichenau, commander of the 6th Army, issued “Conduct of Troops in the Eastern Territories.” It stated that the goal was to eradicate “Asian influence on Europe” by destroying the “Bolshevik-Jewish system.” The order noted that the German soldier “must show full understanding of the necessity of severe but just punishment against the Jewish subhuman” and added another objective: “to suppress uprisings in the immediate rear of the Wehrmacht, which, as experience shows, are

⁴ Wilhelm Keitel, “Direktiva o povedenii germanskikh voisk na okkupirovannykh territoriiakh Sovetskogo Soiuza” [Directive on the Conduct of German Troops in the Occupied Territories of the Soviet Union], May 19, 1941, *Digital Library of Historical Document*, <https://docs.historyrussia.org/ru/nodes/367003>.

⁵ Dmitrii Zhukov and Ivan Kovtun, *Russkie esesovtsy* [Russian SS Men] (Moscow: Veche, 2010), 59.

always provoked by Jews.”⁶ Furthermore, General Commissioner Kube asserted in his reports that the Jewish population was “the main bearer of the partisan movement.”⁷ Thus, high-ranking Nazi officials often made no secret of the extermination of Jews in their orders, disguising it as operations against partisans.

It is also worth noting the Nazis’ economic plans prior to Operation Barbarossa for the exploitation of resources in the Soviet republics, which reveals the devastating nature of the planned invasion. On May 23, 1941, one month before the start of Operation Barbarossa, the office of Reich Minister of Food and Agriculture Herbert Backe prepared the “Economic-Political Directives for the Economic Organization ‘East,’ Agricultural Group.” These directives called for the forced suppression of consumption in the USSR to ensure food supplies for Germany and Europe, and the document noted the “inevitability” of the deaths of tens of millions of people living in the occupied territories.⁸

The German scholar Christian Gerlach, in his monumental study “Kalkulierte Morde: Die deutsche Wirtschafts- und Vernichtungspolitik in Weißrußland 1941 bis 1944”, analyzing the violent events in Belarus, argues that the systematic violence in this territory was part of the Nazis’ genocidal policy, rather than administrative chaos. According to Nazi plans, Belarus was to be subjected to harsh deindustrialization and re-agrarization⁹. The “surplus population” was doomed to starvation or deportation to work in Germany. This primarily affected Belarusian Jews directly, as they were employed in sectors of the urban economy that were slated for liquidation¹⁰. Gerlach also notes that the “fight against partisans”

⁶ “Directive of the Supreme Command of the Wehrmacht,” *Presidential Library*, <https://www.prlib.ru/en/item/1352465>.

⁷ Yitzhak Arad, *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 257.

⁸ “Akttenotiz über Ergebnis der Besprechung mit den Staatssekretären über ‘Barbarossa’” [Memorandum on the Results of the Meeting with State Secretaries on Operation Barbarossa], *1000 Dokumente*, <https://www.1000dokumente.de>.

⁹ Christian Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde: Die deutsche Wirtschafts- und Vernichtungspolitik in Weißrußland 1941 bis 1944* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2013), 1117–18, EPUB.

¹⁰ Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde*, 204.

(Partisanenbekämpfung) served as a pretext for creating “dead zones” to seize livestock and food and to exterminate or deport the local population¹¹.

Thus, the legal framework for Operation Barbarossa not only legitimized mass violence but also created conditions in which the line between anti-partisan warfare and the extermination of the Jewish population was blurred from the outset. This allowed auxiliary units, including the future “Druzhina,” to operate within a logic of escalating violence, where criminal initiatives on the ground did not contradict but rather complemented the strategic directives of the Nazi leadership.

Shortly after the German invasion of the USSR, on July 17, 1941, the Chief of the RSHA issued Operational Order No. 8 to the Security Police and SD units regarding the treatment of Soviet prisoners of war. It described the process of detention, screening, and interrogation of Soviet POWs; specifically, those whom the Germans deemed “trustworthy” were initially to be enlisted to assist in screening other prisoners and carrying out orders from camp leadership, and subsequently to be recruited for intelligence activities¹². This order established the legal framework for the recruitment and formation of collaborationist units composed of Soviet POWs, which subsequently led to the creation of the “Druzhina” Brigade.

Given the catastrophic conditions in the stalags, marked by disease, malnutrition, and violence, cooperation with the German administration became a means of survival for some prisoners of war. At the same time, anti-Soviet sentiments among a part of the Soviet population, shaped by experiences of repression, collectivization, and the “Great Terror,” as well as wartime Soviet orders against captured soldiers and Stalin’s statements that “there are

¹¹ Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde*, 64.

¹² “Direktiva” [Directive], *Digital Library of Historical Documents*, <https://docs.historyrussia.org/nodes/178506>.

no Soviet POWs, only traitors,” provided fertile ground for Soviet citizens to collaborate with the occupiers¹³.

One of the Soviet prisoners of war captured by the Germans in July 1941 was Red Army Lieutenant Vladimir Gil. He was sent to Oflag No. 68, an officers’ camp in Suwalki (East Prussia), and by September 1941, he had begun collaborating with the camp administration and headed the “Russian kommandantur” under the supervision of the SD to “restore order” in the camp. He helped identify Jews and commissars among the Soviet POWs¹⁴. To gain privileges from the camp administration, Gil, who was of Belarusian origin, posed as a Volga German (Volksdeutsche)¹⁵.

The camp had been largely purged of “undesirable elements” and “suspicious individuals,” and the “Russian kommandantur” had gained the “recognition” of the German camp leadership¹⁶. There were also instances of abuse by the “kommandantur.” The witness described an incident of “entertainment” on Christmas 1941, when a drunk Gil and other officers tormented four Jewish prisoners for an hour¹⁷.

Already at this early stage, the motivations of future members of the “Druzhina” reveal a combination of opportunism, ideological adaptation, and personal initiative in anti-Jewish violence. In March 1942, at the instigation of SS-Sturmbannführer Hans Schindowski, who oversaw Operation Zeppelin on behalf of the SD, the “Combat Union of Russian Nationalists” (BSRN) was formed. Vladimir Gil was appointed leader of this “party” and, for the purposes of secrecy, adopted the pseudonym “Rodionov.”¹⁸

After his trip to Germany, on April 20, the day of Hitler's birthday, Gil delivered a program speech to the prisoners, calling on them to join the party to fight

¹³ Mark Edele, *Stalin's Defectors: How Red Army Soldiers Became Hitler's Collaborators, 1941–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

¹⁴ Dmitrii A. Zhukov and Ivan I. Kovtun, *Dvozhdy predavshie: brigada SS “Druzhina”* [Twice Betrayed: The SS Brigade ‘Druzhina’] (Moscow: Veche, 2019), 213–14, FB2.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 190.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 219.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 218.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 220.

“Jewish-Bolshevism.” The event featured the party’s program, drafted by Gil in collaboration with the SD; it called for the creation of a Russian nationalist state under the protectorate of “Greater Germany” and, in particular, the expulsion of all Jews from the state. Membership in the Union was restricted to men aged 18 and older of all nationalities, excluding Jews¹⁹. As noted by Zhukov and Kovtun, there is evidence of strong influence by the SD on the formation of this puppet organization, within which hatred of Jews was encouraged and cultivated at all levels.

Consequently, the puppet party became a tool for recruiting Soviet POWs in the camp, training them, and deploying them for military intelligence purposes. The party served to screen candidates while giving them the impression that they were not merely mercenaries and traitors to their homeland, but ideological fighters for the “Russian cause.” From the very beginning, it had a distinctly anti-Semitic character, excluding Jews from party membership and openly presenting “New Russia” as a state without Jews.

The first combat unit, named “Druzhina,” was formed on May 1, 1942, from 100 prisoners of war selected in Suwałki. The group was transferred to Yablou (near Lublin), where the main “Zeppelin” camp was located. There, the cadets underwent intelligence and sabotage training in preparation for infiltration into the Soviet rear²⁰. The group was officially named “Druzhina,” a name intended to emphasize its “elitism” and its connection to the ancient Russian traditions of princely retinues.

The command structure of “Druzhina” was unique among collaborationist units, as it was under the jurisdiction not of the Wehrmacht but of the SS, specifically the VI Directorate of the RSHA (Foreign Intelligence) under the leadership of Walter Schellenberg²¹. The direct German commander of the “Druzhina” in the second half of 1942 was SS-Hauptsturmführer

¹⁹ Dmitrii A. Zhukov and Ivan I. Kovtun, *1-ia russkaia brigada SS “Druzhina”* [1st Russian SS Brigade “Druzhina”] (Moscow: Veche, 2010), 75–77.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 77–79.

²¹ Perry Biddiscombe, “Unternehmen Zeppelin: The Deployment of SS Saboteurs and Spies in the Soviet Union, 1942–1945,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 52, no. 6 (September 2000): 1116–17.

Klaus von Lepel²². He was later replaced by SS-Hauptsturmführer Gerhard Roissner, who restored order with an “iron fist” and prepared the unit for major operations²³. In April 1943, SS-Obersturmbannführer Karl Appel served as the temporary SS representative attached to the unit²⁴. When participating in “anti-partisan operations”, the “Druzhina” was part of combat groups (Kampfgruppen), operating alongside regular SS troops and other collaborators. Therefore, throughout its existence, “Druzhina” was closely integrated into the German repressive apparatus operating in the Soviet-occupied territories.

Based on the available sources regarding the “Druzhina’s” participation in operations and campaigns against partisans, Belarusians, and Jews, the following categories of roles and tasks performed by “Druzhina” soldiers can be identified.

First and foremost, we must highlight cases of **direct participation in violence against Jews**. These include the identification and abuse of Jews by future leaders of the “Druzhina” while still in Suwałki. Even here, one can distinguish, on the one hand, the execution of orders (identifying Jews and handing them over to the SD), but also manifestations of personal cruelty on the part of the command staff, which indicates a going beyond the bounds of formal subordination.

This practice was further developed during combat operations against partisans and Jews in the summer of 1942 in the Parczew Forests in the Lublin District of the General Government, which served as a “baptism of fire” and a “test of loyalty” for the “Druzhina.” In July 1942, the “Druzhina” participated in Operation Reinhard, combing the Parczew Forests in search of Jews who had escaped deportation, and carried out these operations jointly with police authorities and the 101st Reserve Police Battalion. Data indicates that the brigade was involved in the deaths of a total of 1,500 partisans and Jews during that period²⁵.

²² Alexander Dallin and Ralph S. Mavrogordato, “Rodionov: A Case Study in Wartime Redefection,” *The American Slavic and East European Review* 18, no. 1 (February 1959): 26.

²³ Zhukov and Kovtun, *Dvozhdy predavshie*, 468.

²⁴ Zhukov and Kovtun, *1-ia russkaia brigada SS “Druzhina”*, 125.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 81-84.

Even at this stage, it is clear that the “Druzhina’s” participation in anti-Jewish violence was not accidental or secondary, but rather part of its operational tasks.

It is also important to highlight the figure of Andrei Blazhevich, who was a member of the “Druzhina” command and was involved in the torture and execution of Jewish POWs while in the Suwalki camp. Sources describe his actions as demonstratively cruel and proactive. For example, during Operation Reinhard, according to the memoirs of former “Druzhina” officer Leonid Samutin, who, on the one hand, denied personal involvement in anti-Jewish atrocities, but on the other hand noted that Blazhevich personally hunted down Jews who remained in the villages and personally shot them in front of local residents²⁶.

According to another collaborator, Boris Alelekova, who testified during an interrogation by the MGB, in January 1943 Blazhevich personally shot a Jewish man and woman who had come to the unit's location seeking refuge from German persecution, “without any reason whatsoever.”²⁷

This means that among the leadership of the Druzhina were individuals who harbored personal antipathy and hatred toward Jews and were eager to take personal initiative in solving “the Jewish question”; it is quite likely that for such “initiative” Andrei Blazhevich was entrusted by his superiors in the SD to lead the second battalion of the “Druzhina.” His anti-Semitic violence thus became not only a service obligation but also a form of individual choice. This significantly complicates the interpretation of the “Druzhina” as merely an instrument of German policy, highlighting an element of internal initiative among the command staff.

Another infamous operation involving the direct killing of Jews was Operation “February,” carried out from February 10 to 26, 1943. Formally, it was a large-scale anti-partisan operation, but among its objectives was the total confiscation of livestock and

²⁶ Ibid., 83–84.

²⁷ Zhukov and Kovtun, *Dvozhdy predavshie*, 329–30.

grain. The orders explicitly stated that the civilian population was to be evacuated, with the exception of Jews, who were to be exterminated on the spot. Overall command of the operation was exercised by SS-Brigadeführer and Police Major General Kurt von Gottberg. Gil-Rodionov's battalion was incorporated into Combat Group "East" under the command of SS-Standartenführer Günter Anhalt²⁸.

Units of the "Druzhina" engaged in the systematic burning of villages and mass executions. There is evidence that "Druzhina" members herded women and children into residential buildings and burned them alive. German historians (K. Gerlach, W. Kurilla), who studied the operation's documents, note that Rodionov's battalion struck the Germans with its "extraordinary cruelty."²⁹ According to German data, 2,219 partisans and 7,378 people, including 3,300 Jews, were killed during this operation³⁰.

In the winter of 1943, "Druzhina" was also deployed in Operations "Harvest Festival I and II." These operations were carried out in the Minsk region and involved the systematic extermination of the population and the confiscation of resources in areas of partisan activity. They were led by SS-Brigadeführer Kurt von Gottberg. His official order stated: "Bandits must be attacked and destroyed. Bandits, Jews, Gypsies, and anyone suspected of banditry are to be treated as the enemy." Great importance was attached to the "accounting of agricultural products" (looting of food) and the capture of the workforce for deportation to Germany³¹. Gil-Rodionov's battalion was incorporated into the "Grip" combat group, under the command of SS-Sturmbannführer Hans Grip, along with the 13th Police Battalion and the Dirlewanger Brigade³². The "Druzhina" participated in blocking partisan bases and combing

²⁸ Zhukov and Kovtun, *1-ia russkaia brigada SS "Druzhina"*, 106.

²⁹ Zhukov and Kovtun, *Dvozhdy predavshie*, 99.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 313.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 297.

³² *Ibid.*, 296.

through the forests. During the first phase, 1,165 people were killed, 1,308 were deported to the German Reich, and large quantities of livestock and grain were seized³³.

The second phase of “Harvest Festival” took place from January 30 to February 15, 1943. “Druzhina” became part of the “Bintz” combat group under the command of Police Major Siegfried Bintz. The operation amounted to the systematic burning of villages and mass executions of civilians suspected of having ties to partisans³⁴. As in the previous operation, units under Gyl’s command participated in the confiscation of food and livestock and the killing of 2,325 people, while approximately 300 people were forcibly deported to Germany for labor³⁵.

In June 1943, Himmler issued an order to liquidate the remaining ghettos in “Ostland,” including the ghetto in Glubokoe, which was located in the Plisky District of the Vileika Region. The operation was scheduled for mid-August 1943. The SS and SD planned to enlist the Gil-Rodionov Brigade in this extermination operation³⁶. However, the “Druzhina” unit’s defection to the Soviet partisans on August 16, 1943, prevented the unit from participating in this operation.

This shows that the “Druzhina” was systematically and regularly involved in actions against Jews and Belarusians, which were usually part of broader anti-partisan operations, including the looting, deportation, and murder of the local population, as well as direct combat against the partisans. Jews were usually ordered to be killed on the spot. However, due to the above-mentioned conceptual conflation of “Jew” and “partisan”, and thus “enemy” to “German security”, Jews were doomed to death from the outset during such operations. Thus, the “Druzhina’s” participation in such operations attests not only to its functional role but also to the ideological implementation of the Nazi vision. The “Druzhina’s” anti-partisan

³³ Zhukov and Kovtun, *1-ia russkaia brigada SS “Druzhina”*, 101.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 102.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Zhukov and Kovtun, *Dvozhdy predavshie*, 493.

activities effectively constituted one of the forms of implementing the Final Solution, in which genocide merged with military operations.

Another level of the “Druzhina’s” involvement in anti-Jewish actions consisted of providing **logistical support for genocidal operations**, such as convoying, blockading residential areas, security checks, and guard duty. At this level, “Druzhina” units created the conditions for mass killings carried out by other SS and police units.

The question of “Druzhina’s” involvement in the liquidation of the Slutsk ghetto from February 8 to 9, 1943, remains open. In his memoirs, the collaborator Samutin claimed that the Germans did not involve them in the executions, preferring to use “specialists.”³⁷ This is highly doubtful, given that, as described above, the brigade operated from its inception within a framework of radical Nazi anti-Semitic ideology, which reinforced and radicalized existing anti-Jewish attitudes among its members. By the summer of 1942, “Druzhina” had already established itself as an effective punitive instrument; moreover, immediately after the liquidation of the Slutsk ghetto, the brigade participated in anti-Jewish actions during Operation “February” in the same district. There is reason to believe that “Druzhina” was involved in support functions. This is consistent with the general practice of using collaborationist units to block and control areas of mass executions, thereby reducing the load on German forces.

It is known that the “Druzhina” performed support functions during Operation “Magic Flute” (Zauberflöte), which took place in Minsk in April 1943. From April 17 to 22, 1943, a citywide sweep was conducted in Minsk to identify partisans, underground activists, and “bandit elements.” A unit of the “Druzhina” participated in mass searches, the selection, and the escort of people to forced labor. About 52,000 people (both Jews and non-Jews) were taken to assembly points for more thorough screening and selection for work in Germany³⁸.

³⁷ Ibid., 314.

³⁸ Ibid., 371-72.

The participation of “Druzhina” ensured the functioning of the system of terror and deportations.

The **economic dimension** of the “Druzhina’s” involvement in the genocide on Soviet territory deserves special attention; this manifested itself both in the repeated looting of villages and hamlets during the operations discussed above and in the direct appropriation of the victims’ property for their own purposes. For instance, during its participation in Operation Reinhard, according to documents from the SS and Police Chief of the Lublin District, one of the “Druzhina” units fully met its needs for clothing and uniforms using supplies left behind by Jews sent to death camps³⁹. This meant that the “Druzhina” was integrated into the system of resource redistribution accompanying the Holocaust, which increased the collaborators’ material interest and further “drew” them into the system of genocide.

It is equally important to highlight **the ideological and propaganda activities** of the “Druzhina,” which were aimed at instilling deep-seated anti-Semitic attitudes among its personnel, as well as at spreading such views among the local Belarusian population and partisans. For example, former Red Army Colonel F. G. Gavrilov told soldiers that the future Russia must be a nation-state “without Jews.”⁴⁰ Materials with characteristic titles, such as “Why Jews Are Hated,”⁴¹ were published for soldiers. In correspondence from one of the “Druzhina” commanders, P. V. Bogdanov, to the partisans, claimed that Jews allegedly held 98% of leadership positions in Soviet institutions, and Marxism itself was declared a purely “Jewish” invention⁴². The aim of the propaganda directed at civilians and Soviet partisans was to discredit the Soviet government and the partisan movement by associating them with

³⁹ Ibid., 328-29.

⁴⁰ Zhukov, Dmitrii A., and Ivan I. Kovtun, *Tsvety nenavisti: russkoiazychnaia antisemitskaia propaganda na okkupirovannykh territoriiakh* [Flowers of Hatred: Russian-Language Antisemitic Propaganda in the Occupied Territories], 2nd ed. (Moscow: Piatoi Rim, 2018), 76.

⁴¹ Ibid., 77.

⁴² Zhukov and Kovtun, *Dvozhdy predavshie*, 486–87.

“Jewishness,” and at the same time to legitimize violence against them. In appeals from the brigade headquarters to the partisans, they were urged to cease fighting and stop defending the “Jewish-Stalinist regime.” In propaganda materials distributed among the population, Soviet leaders and underground activists were referred to as “Jewish-Bolshevik vermin” and “Jewish lackeys.”⁴³

Nevertheless, propaganda, material benefits, and the “blood ties” to the Nazi regime did not prevent Gil-Rodionov and a significant portion of the soldiers in his “Druzhina” from defecting to the Soviet partisans to fight against their German commanders once it became clear that victory was shifting to the Soviet Union. Anti-Semitic rhetoric disappeared from Gil’s orders and correspondence after his defection, suggesting that such rhetoric was closely connected to the political and institutional environment in which he operated. While this does not necessarily exclude the possibility of personal anti-Jewish prejudices, it indicates that Gil’s anti-Soviet and anti-Semitic positioning was highly situational and shaped to a considerable extent by pragmatic concerns, including survival and the preservation of authority. Subsequently, during interrogations and in their memoirs, former “Druzhinniki” denied responsibility for the executions of civilians and partisans or shifted the blame onto their comrades.

Taken together, the forms of participation examined lead to the conclusion that the “Druzhina” acted not only as an auxiliary force but as an active component of the system of genocide against Jews in the occupied territories of Poland and Belarus. The “Druzhina” was integrated into the SS structure and was subordinate to German command. It operated as part of combat units and carried out tasks determined by the highest leadership of the SS and the police. The functions of the “Druzhina” went beyond strictly anti-partisan warfare and were

⁴³ Ibid., 408-10.

in fact integrated into the broader policy of genocide, especially as the line between the fight against partisans and the extermination of the Jewish population became blurred.

At the same time, the “Druzhina” was neither a fully autonomous actor nor merely an instrument of German policy. Its activities constituted a hybrid model in which structural violence imposed by the Nazi leadership was combined with initiative at the operational level. At the same time, the subsequent defection of the Druzhina led by Gil-Rodionov to the USSR, the sharp reduction in anti-Semitic rhetoric and the denial of complicity in the crimes reveals, to a large extent, the opportunistic nature of the leader’s of the “Druzhina” and his anti-Semitism, as he aligned himself with the side he perceived as victorious in order to preserve his life and authority, despite his earlier involvement in genocidal violence together with many of his comrades.

An analysis of the forms of participation by the “Druzhina” reveals that this unit was not merely a tool of the German command, but also an actor capable of perpetuating and intensifying acts of violence – a fact that is significant for understanding the nature of collaborationism and the mechanisms behind the Holocaust in Eastern Europe.

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