Blackshirts and Bloodlands:

A Comparative analysis of The Holocaust in Italy and Ukraine

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It may seem evident from the perspective of the twenty-first century that the acceptance of difference is not only a key feature of liberal democratic states, but to life in a modern civil society in general. When a community fails to embrace or accept these differences – be them cultural, political, or religious -, conflict will inevitably emerge on some scale within that community. For any society to function and progress in harmony cooperation, inclusion, acceptance, and the embrace of diversity is a necessity.

This understanding of diversity was not always so evident. Before, during and after the Second World War, rising nationalism charged by ethnocentrism swept across Europe resulting in one of the worst genocides in human history. Italy and Ukraine offer two unique examples of the motivations that charged the road to genocide and the resulting resistance against that genocide from both Jewish and non-Jewish populations. A desire to define and defend the ethnic and cultural identity of each nation motivated nationalists to attack Jewish minorities and work with the Nazis as both occupiers and allies. This created divisions within these states and as oppression became more brutal, so too did resistance become more defiant. Jewish people, political dissidents and other unaccepted groups were dehumanized in each region allowing many to either turn a blind eye to violence or collaborate with it in passive or active roles perpetuating the crimes of the holocaust even after German occupation ended. Rather than creating a more unified monocultural, state each region was plunged into chaos and injustice, in part because of their failure to accept the differences of others.

Hitler’s National Socialism found inspiration in Italian Fascism, a regime in power under Benito Mussolini from 1922. Frustration with the government following the First World War and a sense of betrayal over limited land grants to Italy in the peace simultaneously opened the political sphere to a coup and a distancing between Italy and its former Allies. The early
challenge of Italian Fascism was unifying the revolutionary youth paramilitary movement of the Squadristi (also called the Blackshirts), with more conservative minded nationalists (Tannenbaum, 1969, p. 1186). This group eventually would become the Fascist state’s volunteer militia, swearing supreme allegiance to Mussolini the dictator.

Unlike in Germany though, Fascist politics were not initially informed by anti-Semitism. Many party members in those early days were Italian Jews who played key roles in the military and government (Ledeen, 1975, p. 4). While they still faced discrimination and obstacles for their religion, the policy of the party was not initially motivated by a hatred of Jewish people (Ledeen, 1975, p. 7). The early stages of Italian Fascism were primarily focused on the modernization of Italian life as well as extending the power of the dictatorship (Tannenbaum, 1969, p. 1186). From the march on Rome until their fall in 1943 the Fascist Italian party was interested in maintaining their power by bringing the general populace into the political fold. The policies of Mussolini’s regime were based on removing any perceived threat to their power, which quickly disintegrated into paranoia of outside elements within Italy. This mindset was seen before any anti-Semitic policy was created in the persecution of the Masons which was likely unnecessary due to the size of the organization (Ledeen, 1975, p. 4).

There are several parallels between Nazism and Fascism in Italy, both in mechanisms of government as well as in motivations, and furthermore, in their popular support. While anti-Semitism was not an initial policy of Mussolini, the adoption of Racial laws in 1938 came from an Italian perspective and not solely from German influence. The hard-nationalistic rejection of liberal institutions charged by the Italian fascist youth movement also primed it well for an anti-Jewish backlash given the prevalence of conflation between Jews and left-wing politics. This coupled with Mussolini’s own paranoia of political dissidents demonstrates how Italy’s own
intolerance of their political fringes motivated an escalating hatred of Jews and others resulting in Holocaust collaboration.

The nature of Italian nationalism was one charged by the prevalence of Roman Catholicism within the country. While Mussolini claimed there was no Jewish question in Italy he also argued for a homogenous culture and country (Ledeen, 1975, p. 8). The conflation of Religion and Nation in Italy was at the core of its conservatism, unlike in Germany, where the National Socialists occasionally nodded to the Protestant and Catholic religious establishments to garner support for anti-Jewish policies, but in practice, worked to undermine and destroy the Catholic Church’s political autonomy and authority. Rules over education in 1923 sparked tensions between Italian Catholics and Jews (p. 5) showing how, despite the façade of a stable united state Mussolini was working to present, cracks could easily form. So inevitably there was to some extent a Jewish question in Italy, though not necessarily charged in the same way Hitler and the Nazi apparatus understood it. Furthermore, a growing Zionist movement in Italy, initially supported likely for the cynical goal of threatening British Mediterranean power by removing them from Palestine, began to worry some in government, including Mussolini, that Jewish identity would supersede Jews’ Italian identities (p. 10). Just as the Masons had been accused of being an international body working against the state, the propaganda of a Zionist conspiracy – deeply entrenched across Europe for decades – began to concern Mussolini. While he may not have initially been anti-Semitic, his political ambition and paranoia led him to question and threaten both Zionism and the Italian Jewish community.

These fears, coupled with a general ignorance about the Jewish people – in Italy, an exceptionally old, small, and well-integrated minority - could have been easily exploited by the genuine anti-Semitism of Hitler to expand the Holocaust. The abruptness of Mussolini’s
adoption of anti-Semitism and the sudden prolific spread of propaganda (Fargion, 1986, p. 27) seem odd considering his early advocacy for a Jewish nation. The motivations for this shift in perspective may vary, but it seems that a contributing factor was the increased militarism and expansionism of the Italian state during the 1930’s. The brutal violence of the Italian invasion of Ethiopia coincided with this change in attitude from the top of the Fascist party towards the Jews of Italy. A nation that will commit acts of mass murder and use poison gas does not generally preach acceptance of others, so it may seem unsurprising that they would turn to racial discrimination against Jews. Yet the pursuit of a clear and unified Italian culture was misguided at best, as it is in any nation. Amongst the general populace there was a clear cultural division between the more industrial north and more agrarian south of Italy. Instead of achieving Mussolini’s desired state of ethnic and cultural harmony in a unified Italy, the nation was thrown into chaos following the invasion of southern Italy by the Allies in 1943. After only a few months, the Fascist state was overthrown, and the nation was divided between the south, now in an armistice with the allies, and the north, now a puppet state of the Nazis.

Despite the passage of racial laws and pressure from the Germans to deport Mediterranean Jews from Italy and its occupied zones, it seems that major deportations did not begin until after the German occupation of Italy following the regime’s collapse in 1943 (Reguer, 2013, pp. 135-139). This indicates both the resistance of the Italian population and the military to practically enforce Mussolini’s racial laws, particularly those imposed by the Germans. Partisan efforts against the occupation of Northern Italy by both Jewish and Non-Jewish Italians shows this spirit of resistance. Many Italians were anti-Semitic being influenced by propaganda and participating in the deportations of Jews during the German occupation. But there were many more who were accepting of the Jewish population taking steps to shelter and support Jews
throughout their territories. This protection spanned from individuals and groups, from priests to farmers, all motivated their rejection of the hatred and intolerance of the fascists. These internal divisions help clarify why Mussolini was so hated and why so many Italians were willing to side with the Allies in 1943 despite being invaded by those same forces only months before (Fargion, 1986, p. 19). While Italy’s Jews were not as large a minority as in other European states, making up only a tenth of a percent of the total population they were still a visible minority participating at every level of Italian life. Failure to accept this group escalated to open attacks upon them in Italy but rather than achieving the ethnic unity Mussolini so craved he only divided his nation breeding resentment among his supporters and creating fierce enemies. The end result of his vision was his own death and the division of his nation left to rebuild after the devastation of the war.

The case of Ukraine shows a different story of collaboration and resistance, shaped in large part by its own recent experience with nationalism quite different from that in Italy. Nationalism in Ukraine was charged with an anti-Russian edge that had been a point of conflict for centuries. National symbols like the Ukrainian Trident were explicitly anti Russian in nature while the Autocephalous church in Ukraine signified deep rooted local traditions from a pre-Russian age (Bellezza, 2008, p. 573). While a nationalist identity was formed amongst the Ukrainians as early as the 17th century the possibility of a Ukrainian state was not possible until after the First World war. The collapse of Tsarist Russia led to the formation of an independent Ukraine which fought unsuccessfully against the Bolsheviks during the revolution. This failed Ukraine was made its own Soviet Socialist Republic and had a pro-Ukrainian agenda fostered within by Lenin, himself. Through the 1920’s Ukraine saw a growing sense of identity and a recovering economy, but these both came under direct threat when Stalin took control. The Five-
Year Plans and collectivized agriculture devastated Ukraine leading to the horrific man-made famine in 1933 known as the Holodomor. Only three years later the Terror took violent hold of the entire USSR, creating a culture of fear and mistrust as anyone could be turned over to Stalin’s purges (Snyder, 2010).

Rather than an allied state to Nazi Germany, Ukraine’s WWII experience was that of an occupied land designed to be part of the Third Reich’s dreams of Lebensraum: Hitler’s brutal and enormous territorial expansion program. By the time of the German Invasion in 1941, Ukraine was primed with an anti-Bolshevik anti-Russian population that could have viewed Fascist Germany as liberators more than conquerors (Bellezza, 2008, p. 579). Violence and starvation had desensitized the local population and the looming existential threat Stalin posed to the Ukrainian people inspired a strong anxiety. As well the Terror spread suspicion throughout the Soviet Union between neighbors as anyone could be turned over to state police by those closest to them. These factors together formed an easily exploitable situation that could turn mass anger and panic towards a vulnerable Jewish population.

The German occupation of Ukraine was chaotic at best with a conflicted high command. A faction had emerged amongst the Germans that promoted a pro-Ukrainian agenda to gain local allies and administrators as well as support its anti-Jewish aims (p. 574). The other side viewed Ukraine as a possible German colony within the confines of the Third Reich in which the Ukrainians would either be used for labour or removed. As the Nazis had done in Germany, Jewish people were conflated with Bolshevism and scapegoated as the perpetrators of all Soviet crimes committed against the Ukrainian people. While anti-Semitism was surely present in Ukraine this hatred of the Soviets seemed to have been a powerful propaganda tool for genocide. Under this line of logic not only did Germany represent the only real hope of an independent
Ukraine but the Jewish people were responsible for all the anxiety and violence that had become ingrained amongst Ukrainians. While fear of forced deportation to labour camps and police violence from the Germans worked to have neighbours sell one another out, it seems the truly brutal and proactive participation in the Holocaust stemmed from this violent paranoia.

The looting of Jewish property and mass graves even after the war had ended is a further indicator of the ways in which propaganda about Jewish wealth and privilege had spread throughout the region. Despite an incredibly large Jewish population in Ukraine, comprising the largest minority in the region at the time, and one that suffered under Stalin along with everyone else, many ethnic Ukrainians viewed Jews as foreigners within their communities. An ingrained sense of territorial right to Ukraine threatened by centuries of Russian invasion legitimized this notion that the Jews did not belong in Ukraine. This attitude may help to explain the incredible violence committed by Ukrainians as a sort of Ethnic cleansing of their supposed land motivated by a differed hatred than that of the Nazis.

The pre-war contexts of both the Ukraine and Italy were both characterized by political unrest and rising nationalisms charged by a fear of outside forces. Italy and Ukraine each had territorial ambitions that could not have been achieved without the support of the German army. In the case of Ukraine, no western power seemed to pose a threat to the USSR in the same way Germany did nor did any have an interest in challenging Soviet rule (p. 576). In Italy their ambitions in the Mediterranean were directly challenged by both Britain and France which as allied powers Mussolini could not hope to defeat alone. Given these circumstances not only was there a local impetus for anti-Semitic violence but also the political motivation to appease German goals. Italy under Fascist rule was a police state through and through that created equal parts social anxiety and militarism. Ukraine was faced with police violence, government
corruption and a threat to their identity forcing some to flee the USSR to Poland or Romania to avoid starvation. For these reasons it should be no surprise that the Holocaust saw such widespread collaboration in each country and the extreme violence seen in Ukraine. While there was not as deep rooted an anti-Semitic propaganda machine in these communities as there was in Germany, it seems collaboration could be charged by very different factors. Like in Germany the anxieties and fears of the local populations were redirected towards the Jews as a scape goat becoming representative of completely unrelated problems. In a deeply disconcerting way, it seems that collaboration in mass slaughter or the willingness to ignore it did not require an overtly anti-Semitic outlook as the ambitions that charged collaboration could be cynical or personal. So long as those persecuted were perceived to be outsiders to ones’ own group it was easy to ignore the ever-increasing violence as irrelevant to an individual or their family. But a nation built on injustice will never show true justice to anyone in it.

While these circumstances may explain some of the broader political motivations for collaboration in a given region, it is equally important to recognize the day to day participation and silence of non-victimized civilians. A simple fact of the Holocaust was that it required logistical support as did the German administration in any area. This point is explored in Alexis Herr’s work on the Italian camp Fossili di Carpi through the idea of the economic benefit enjoyed by the various businesses that knowingly supported the Holocaust through their trade (Herr, 2014, p. 26-40). The extent of this “consent” is a key feature of Italian participation in the holocaust (p. 24). The question of Italian collaboration is one of imposition and public popularity. Was anti-Semitism a German policy inflicted on the Italian people, particularly under the occupation of the north in 1943, or were the Italian people willing to quietly go along with German war crimes for personal gain? As in the case of Ukraine, it seems fair to state that by
1943, to describe the Italians, at least in the north, as the victims of German expansionism as the region had been taken over by the German army to halt the allied advance. The threat of German punishment was real, and many may have been coerced to participate in German plans to protect themselves or their families. But the violence that had allowed Mussolini to rise to power had created in Italy a populace compliant with Fascist demands (Herr, 2014). The groundwork of the Holocaust was already established in Italy by the time of the German occupation in 1943 as it was in Ukraine, so all the Nazis had to do was exploit local frameworks to their own ends.

Another form of economic incentivization was the opportunistic looting of Jewish property during and after the Holocaust. Though the seizure of Jewish property occurred extensively throughout Europe it took on an uglier side in Ukraine, where grave sites were disrupted by local Ukrainians to search for gold teeth and earrings (Anatoliĭ, 1970, p. 17). The looting of Jewish goods was still highly risky as the Germans claimed everything for themselves, which speaks to the desperation or greed of the people committing these acts. The circumstances that led people to believe and continue to believe that somehow Ukraine’s Jews were better off than other Ukrainians and thus inspire them to look for gold teeth or hidden treasures shows the deep dehumanization and isolation of the Jews in Ukraine (p. 17). The suffering of the Ukrainian peoples within the collective farming systems and Stalin’s Five-year plans created a deep poverty in Ukraine. This was not improved by the devastation of the German occupation and with propaganda from the Germans and long-standing myths of Jewish privilege it seems many became vultures. While it may not be direct participation in the killings committed, it seems an obvious endorsement of the crime and disrespect of the victim to steal their belongings for personal gain. This form of anti-Semitism commodifies the victims of violence turning their bodies into a treasure to search in a bizarre and horrific act of dehumanization. While it may
prove the desperation of local peoples that they would risk their lives pursuing the fantasy of finding gold it seems unreasonable to accept looting in this case as a simple necessity and not a form of consent for war crimes.

The notion of necessity is often used as a justification for collaboration with the Germans during the second world war throughout the continent. Yet this takes on a different reality with Italy before the occupation of 1943. Unlike in Ukraine, Italy had endorsed racial anti-Semitism as a state in 1938 with its own racial code of law, similar to the Nuremberg laws in Germany (1935). It seems a reaching argument to say these laws were solely founded in the goal of creating closer ties to Germany as Mussolini himself had become paranoid of Judaism (Ledeen, 1975, p. 9). It is equally off-base to say the Fascist regime of Italy had no racial ideals as their brutal violence in both Libya and Ethiopia showed the same kind of racial colonial imperialism seen throughout Europe at the time. Bulgaria demonstrated that a state allied to the Reich could resist Jewish deportations without invasion, and Bulgaria still benefited from territorial gains. So, at least on a state level, Italy must not have only been a bystander to the Holocaust but a willing participant in the escalating and increasingly violent anti-Semitism in Europe. While many individuals did not agree with, and actively resisted anti-Semitic policy, there was a willingness to accept both Fascism and anti-Semitism before the German occupation (Herr, 2014, p. 6). Fear of violence or other punishments from the Germans is then surely not the sole motivator of Italian collaboration. Much like in Germany itself, the greed or apathy of the people was enough to quietly allow the deportations and suffering of thousands to unfold so long as they did not have to see the killings themselves.

While there were those in Italy willing to either profit from or ignore the Holocaust, there were those who were willing to resist joining partisan movements in the occupied north or
sheltering Jewish people. Many who were faced with the oppression and violence of the Nazis had to resist but others took great personal risk leaving relative safety to fight back. Primo Levi, an Italian Jew, joined a partisan group in the North and was captured, sent to Auschwitz and barely survived (Reguer, 2013, p. 141). Despite knowing the incredible risk of his work as a partisan, he and others fought back in any way they could. While this active resistance is inspiring, the intellectual resistance of many also deserves respect and acknowledgement. Those who risked their lives to record the history or took on the brutal emotional burdens of telling their stories are courageous in their own right. Despite the silence of the Pope on the matter of the Holocaust, many Catholics sheltered Jews or protected them in other ways particularly those who had intermarried with other Catholics (p. 141). Failure to accept others will inevitably create resistance from that group, and as intolerance escalates, so too will the resistance from a greater number of people motivated by morality or sympathy. Much to the chagrin of Europe’s Fascists, whether they were German or Italian, this motivation to resist would undermine their efforts until the Third Reich’s collapse in 1945.

The violent nature of collaboration generally differed between the deportations of Italy and the Holocaust of bullets in Ukraine. While Italian collaboration had an air of separation at least from the murders in Ukraine things were chaotic and anything but removed. The first volunteer forces to join with the German army assisted with the “liberation” of Ukraine being quickly disbanded by the Wehrmacht after declaring independence (Bellezza, 2008, p. 576) for Ukraine. This early willingness to not only join with the Germans, but to do so violently, demonstrates this active participation with the Reich and its goals. The legacy of violence as a means to an end had become ingrained in the region as discussed in Timothy Snyder’s “Bloodlands,” where Ukraine was at the epicenter of decades long violence (Snyder, 2010). The
desire of empires to use the region as a bread basket had made it a central point of conflict and a key goal of the German invasion. The brutality of the Holocaust in this region is completely foreign to the notion of an orderly, distant and mechanistic genocide as it may have appeared in Western Europe. Auxiliary police units made up of Ukrainians roamed the countryside visiting villages in search of Jews or resistance members and executing them (Dean, 2000). The violence was personal, and participation meant becoming a murderer making it hard to argue collaborators were acting out of some form of self-preservation. These were not people housing German soldiers or feeding the army, they were killers who acted independently in some cases or with only vague orders from above. This type of indiscriminate violence could not have been possible without the legacy of death present in the region and the statistical killings of the Terror. In this regard a stark contrast between Italy and Ukraine is made apparent in the monstrous actions of those who followed in the Germans footsteps. A desensitization to violence which made people mechanical in their cruelty and distant from their humanity and the total dehumanization of Jews or other social outcasts turned men into monsters.

To truly grasp this gap between the two case studies, Ukrainian war crimes deserve a deeper examination. Babi Yar is one of the most disturbing cases and sites of collaboration in Ukraine, both for the overwhelming number of Kiev’s Jews that were massacred and also the ways in which they were killed. Over two days, 28-29 September, 1941, over 33,000 Jews were killed at the site outside Kiev.

The account of Dina Mironovna Pronicheva; a survivor of the massacre, is horrific beyond imagination. There is a grotesqueness to every level of the killings; a primal and inhuman rage, that makes it hard to fathom. A painful irony emerges from the belief of some that Germans were “cultured, decent people; not your barbaric Russia” (Anatoliï, 1970, p. 103) that
shows how a positivist attitude of Germany had pervaded even the Jewish community in Ukraine. The participation of Ukrainian police is present throughout but the recognition of men from “western Ukraine” (p.106) shows that it was not only local conscripts but people acting throughout the country with the Germans. There was only a vague order to the executions, large groups being led to the edge of the ravine and shot. One telling moment is when a Ukrainian police officer is willing to participate in the execution of his fellow Ukrainians who he himself called “our people” (p.108) to cover up the killings and ensure the next day more Jews would unwittingly gather for their executions. To commit the actions seen at Babi Yar, the rapes, beatings, dehumanization and murders with guns and knifes as if it was a “hard days work” (p.111) must indicate an extreme desensitization. Without the history of violence ingrained in Ukraine this sort of sheer brutality could not have been met with such an apathetic audience.

Babi Yar and the many other mass killings in Ukraine committed by Ukrainian collaborators could not have happened in Italy so blatantly and visibly amongst the public. This is the core difference between the two and the strongest indicator of the importance of historical violence perpetuating further and more extreme forms of violence. Italian collaboration was that of opportunists and bystanders willing to overlook horrific cruelty for personal gain or for fear of facing personal risk. In Ukraine these forms were also present but the active participation in the mass killing and violation of their fellow Ukrainians required an ingrained desensitization both on an individual and societal level not seen in Italy.

As horrifying and widespread as collaboration with the Holocaust was in Ukraine, there was also an extensive partisan effort to impede the German advance particularly after occupation began in earnest. Both Jewish and Non-Jewish Ukrainians bombed rail lines, poisoned supplies, destroyed equipment or hid Jews from death squads. While Italy did not see as extensive or
violent a partisan effort as was present in Ukraine there was also a less desperate need to resist in Italy. The Ukrainians were kept in the communal farming system established by the Soviets to keep easier track of the population and make them more exploitable as slave labour. Many villages were wiped out or devastated by death squads and the demands of the German army for food left many in the same desperation as they had faced during the Holodomor. A much larger population of Jews in Ukraine were much more aware of the violence of the Germans at this time than they were in Italy, so attitudes that things could get better were less prevalent. This also pushed many Jews fleeing their homes to escape death to join with partisan efforts both out of necessity and a desire for revenge. The importance of these efforts throughout eastern Europe cannot be overstated as the German army was stalled and starved for supplies against the ever-growing Soviet army. We can only imagine if Moscow, Stalingrad or Leningrad could have held out should the Germans have been able to fully supply their frontlines.

The nationalism that arose in Europe in the wake of the First World War was charged by notions of ethnic nation-states. Hitler’s Lebensraum, the annexation of Austria and the Sudetenland, were all justified through this idea of a racial right to territorial autonomy and self-determination - that lands in which Germans lived were German themselves, by extension. This conflated construction of the individual and the nation also justified the opposite thought, that those who were not included in this construction of a national community could therefore not live in it. These ideas were present throughout the continent in both Ukraine and Italy and justified a mindset that regarded integrated Jews as foreigners and enemies of the state simply for existing.

However, national communities are imagined and constructed. What it meant to be Italian or Ukrainian were vague notions - ill defined as it is anywhere and when the stakes are
made as great as they were, violence blossomed. In a climate in which integral nationalism was predominant, a different opinion or party loyalty or belief system or cultural background could bring into question one’s right to citizenship or community. In nationalism, the outsider is frequently held up as a pariah against which a national identity can design and pride itself. Fear, hatred, a sense of superiority or any other plethora of terms drawn from a community’s historical experience or contemporary context could be used to define the evil at the core of Fascist ideology and its multiple versions of collaboration. Yet these observations drawn from the two case studies of wartime Italy and Ukraine also demonstrate a more overarching point that has relevance for contemporary states the twenty-first century. Stability is not found when a state refuses to accept and embrace the diversity of its citizens; only imperial ambition and raw brutality.

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