PJS STUDIES
DOI: 10.48261/pjs210203

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'DI ERSHTE DAYCH'N'. A PICTURE OF THE GERMAN OCCUPATION OF 1915–18 IN THE MEMORIES OF THE POLESIE JEWS

The Jewish experience of the first German occupation of 1915–18 in those areas that had formerly been part of the Russian Empire is an issue that deserves recognition. In the title, I quoted the name of the chapter 'Di ershte Daych'n' [The First Germans] from the memoirs of Dawid German about Bereza Kartuska, one of the many towns in Polesie where Central Powers troops were stationed during the Great War.[1] After 22 years, the inhabitants of Polesie came into contact with 'other' Germans. In a way, this text is intended to answer the question of what memory of German rule was left behind by that first occupation.

This study covers accounts concerning the area that fell within the borders of the Polesie province after the reconstitution of the state of Poland in 1919. The basic source used in this study is the testimonies contained in the so-called memorial books (*yizkor*) published by organisations of former inhabitants of western Polesie. Of course, there is a risk that accounts about the First World War that were written after 1945 could have been influenced by the traumatic experiences of the Third Reich's

[1] D. German, *Pinkas fun finf kehilot: Pruzhane, Bereze, Malech, Shereshev, Selts*, ed. M.W. Bernstein, Buenos Aires 1958, p. 375.

Holocaust. However, the assessments formulated by these witnesses refer to specific facts that took place in the years 1915–18. In addition, some of the texts from which the information has been taken are reprints of memoirs published before 1 September 1939. Some of the works cited here devoted to Pińsk and Prużany were written before the Holocaust; as were the memoirs of an Imperial-Royal Austro-Hungarian army officer who served in western Polesie, among other places. When using such recollections, one should always bear in mind the risk of contaminating them with presentism. However, in the case of this article, an internal criticism of all the texts used has not shown them to convey a false image of the past, although the subjectivity of the witnesses and their individual perspective of viewing events has naturally made themselves felt in them. The authors of the accounts were not historians, although they were aware of the importance of the task they were undertaking in order to preserve the image of their own experiences for posterity.

The boundaries of the area considered in this paper are marked by the river Słucz in the East and the river Bug in the West, a line running along Wołkowysk–Słonim–Baranowicze in the North, and Włodawa–Kamień Koszyrski–Sarny in the South. In administrative terms, at the beginning of 1915 this area belonged to the Grodno and Minsk governorates of the Russian Empire.

After the end of the Napoleonic Wars, and to an even greater extent after the abolition of serfdom and the expropriation of peasants in the Russian Empire, and with the construction of railroads and transit roads and the intensification of inland trade, the population of Polesie experienced slow but steady economic development. With the scarce resources of natural fossil resources that exist in this area, the inventiveness of the entrepreneurs who used the resources available to build the foundations of various processing plants is awe-inspiring. For example, the sources mention factories for tablecloths, plywood, floorboards, matches, tanneries, potteries, brickyards, and so on.[2]

Jews constituted at least 12 per cent of the total local population. They mainly lived in cities, towns and communal villages, although several hundred families dwelt

[2] *Pinkas Byten. Der ojfkum un untergang fun a yidisher kehila*, Buenos Aires 1954, pp. 8, 18; *Kobrin Zamlbukh*, Buenos Aires 1951, p. 17; *Rishonim la-mered: Lakhva*, Jerusalem–Tel Aviv 1957, pp. 423–24, 432; *Rozhina. A yizkor bukh nokh der umgelumener rozhinoier kehila*, Tel Aviv 1957, p. 202; *Toizn yor Pinsk*, New York 1941, pp. 92–93.

in rural colonies established in the mid-nineteenth century, or intermingled among the Christian peasants.[3] It was Jewish merchants and shopkeepers who organised regional and interregional trade and dominated a number of trades. Jews also worked as factory workers, and over a thousand people made a living by farming. Those who could not compete in the local labour market migrated to other regions of Russia; to the Kingdom of Poland established in 1815 at the Congress of Vienna and called Poland by the local Jews;[4] or outside the territory under the tsar's rule altogether. Sometimes these emigrations were forced by fire, which removed most of the wooden buildings in Polesie's towns and villages from the surface of the earth. Even the largest city, Brest (Brześć nad Bugiem),[5] was seriously damaged at the turn of the twentieth century by two great fires.[6]

It should be emphasised that an important condition for the economic development of Polesie before the First World War was its location on the route linking central Russia with the Congress Kingdom. Moreover, thanks to its inland water connections, goods from Polesie reached the Baltic and Black Seas. The links with these two seas even induced some chroniclers to use the term 'Poleska Hansa'.[7] This can be treated as an exaggeration, but it illustrates the local merchants' pride in participating in the economic system of this part of Europe. People went to distant places in the empire in search of work. For example, the inhabitants of Łachwa looked for temporary employment in Odessa and Kiev.[8] Undoubtedly, the local economy was influenced by its close relationship with the economic system of the tsarist state as a whole.

Although the Jews of Polesie took rational advantage of the economic situation during the period preceding the First World War, they had important reasons for dissatisfaction. First of all was the way in which they were treated by the representatives of the Russian state. They were remembered as bribe-takers

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[3] *Drohichyn. Finf hundert yor yiddish-lebn*, Chicago 1958, pp. 11–12.

[4] It has not been established whether representatives of other nationalities and religions living in these areas also used the term 'Poland' to refer to the Congress Kingdom.

[5] For clarity, the city will simply be referred to in this text as 'Brest'.

[6] These fires broke out in 1895 and 1901; see *Entsyklopedias fun Galut-Lender: Brisk-D'Lite*, Jerusalem–Tel Aviv 1955, p. 98; W. Mondalski, *Brześć Podlaski (Brześć Litewski, Brześć nad Bugiem). Zarys geograficzno-historyczny*, Turek 1929, p. 87.

[7] *Toizn yor Pinsk*, p. 92; *Pinkas fun finf kehilot*, pp. 328–31.

[8] *Rishonim la-mered*, pp. 441–42.

who discriminated against the Jewish population and made their lives difficult.[9] The law limited the options which the Jews had to develop, as individuals and collectives.[10] A person of the Mosaic faith could not count on making a career in state institutions or even becoming a regular employee therein. There was no chance of becoming an officer or pursuing any professional service in the army. One example of discrimination is the composition of the Brest City Council, which had only three Jews before the First World War, even though the city's 40,000 Jewish inhabitants constituted the majority of the population. At the same time, its 17,000 Christians were represented by 29 councillors.[11] From 1882, Russian Jews associated the state apparatus with the pogroms aimed at them that took place from time to time in the Russian Empire and the Kingdom of Poland.[12] Pogroms also occurred after the loss of the war with Japan; one such also took place in Brest on 29 May 1905.[13] The tsarist state was openly criticised, among others by politically active people in various parties, both legal and illegal. However Russia was still their home country; that is why representatives of Jewish institutions joined the social campaigns to help the army and civilians injured after war broke out 2 August 1914.[14] Jewish leaders wanted reforms that would provide them with the formal and actual civic equality enjoyed by their fellow believers in, for example, Germany or the United States.

The Russian army's officer corps was prejudiced against Jewish people; it upheld the opinion that Jews held anti-state attitudes and carried out anti-state activity. This resulted in rough treatment, and in the face of Russian military failures during the first period of the war with Germany and Austria–Hungary, this reluctance sometimes turned into threatening suspicion and open hostility. Jews were accused of spying for the Central Powers.[15] Rumours spread that they had deposited their savings in Germany

[9] *Pinkas Byten*, p. 115; *Drohichyn*, p. 13; *Gedenk-bukh fun Kamenets-Litovsk, Zastavie un di kolonies*, Tel Aviv 1967, p. 447.

[10] The Jews were no exception to the discrimination. Certain restrictions were applied to Poles, for example. The native populations in Siberia also stood lower in the Russian social hierarchy.

[11] *Entsyklopedias fun Galut-Lender: Brisk-D'Lite*, p. 101.

[12] *Drohichyn*, p. 15.

[13] *Entsyklopedias fun Galut-Lender: Brisk-D'Lite*, pp. 99–100.

[14] *Toizn yor Pinsk*, p. 178; *Pinkas fun der shtot Pruzhane*, Prużany 1930, pp. 196–98.

[15] S. Dubnow, *Di velt-geshikhte fun yidishn-folk*, vol. 10, New York-Buenos Aires 1938, pp. 420–21; *Telekhaner Yizkor-buch*, Los Angeles 1963, p. 17; *Toizn yor Pinsk*, p. 178; A. Kelletat, 'Der Krieg und die Juden in Litauen', *Annaberger Annales* 2011, no. 19, p. 209; *Pinkas fun der shtot Pruzhane*, pp. 196–97.

and expressed support for that country while at the same time demonstrating disloyalty to Russia.[16] In the autumn of 1914 and the spring of 1915, a wave of refugees, including Jews, began to arrive in Polesie, after being forced by the Russian authorities to leave their homes in the Kingdom of Poland and the western governorates of the empire. They brought news of the brutality carried out by their own army as it covered its retreat. The Cossacks and Circassians gained the worst reputations.[17]

At the same time, a positive opinion of the state regimes of the German Empire and the Imperial-Royal Austro-Hungarian Empire persisted among Russian Jews. In view of the aversion to tsarism and their current bad experiences with the tsarist army, some Jews awaited the arrival of the German and Austro-Hungarian armies with eagerness. There were discussion about when 'reb Velvele' and 'reb Yossele' would appear, codenames or pseudonyms for Emperors Wilhelm II Hohenzollern and Franz Joseph I Habsburg.[18] The Germans were highly regarded as 'bearers of civilization' (*hoypt-treger fun tsivilizatsye*).[19] In Byteń, some Jews saw Wilhelm II as a 'messiah' who would bring them salvation from the oppression of the tsarist regime.[20] In summer 1915 a local Zionist, Szymon Szteper, went along the streets of the town with a broad smile, going up to people in the streets and speaking with joy about the 'defeat of Nikolai'.[21] The witness notes that this is how many Jews behaved at that time, and added: "people believed in Germans, salvation was expected from them, it was deemed a certainty that they would help change life for the better".[22] A similar approach was also represented at that time by residents of Drohiczyn Poleski, among others, who perceived the Germans as 'defenders of freedom'. This positive attitude prompted them to stay where they were and wait for the arrival of a foreign army.[23] At the same time, though, one must not forget the thousands of Jews who were conscripted into the tsarist army and fought for Russia under its banner. In 1914 and 1915 some of them showed demonstrative loyalty to Russia

[16] *Telekhaner Yizkor-buch*, p. 142.
[17] Dubnow, *Di velt-geshikhte*, pp. 421–22.
[18] *Pinkas Byten*, p. 116; *Pinkas fun finf kehilot*, p. 375.
[19] *Pinkas Byten*, p. 115.
[20] bid., p. 116.
[21] Ibid., pp. 116–17.
[22] Ibid., p. 116.
[23] *Drohichyn*, p. 66.

– an imperfect country, but still their own. A witness from Bereza Kartuska wrote about it.[24]

In summer 1915, the Russian military command took the decision to repeat the tactics of the war with Napoleon, when the Russians gave way to the enemy, leaving scorched earth to the invaders. This time the order was not carried out in full, but what was done had a great impact on the situation of the civilians, including Jews. The symbol of the ruthlessness of the Russian army was the expulsion of tens of thousands of inhabitants of Brest from the city, condemning them to homelessness regardless of their nationality. Most of their property was destroyed and looted, because the owners were prevented from taking it away while it was still possible.[25]

In fact, in August and September 1915, 'their own army' (that is the Russians) appeared to the Jews as a curse. The troops covering the retreat looted, destroyed and burned everything they could. In Byteń, the Cossacks burned down the town as they were leaving.[26] In Kamień Koszyrski they robbed and harassed Jewish women.[27] At Pińsk, several hours before the Germans entered, they robbed houses on the main streets.[28] The Russians set fire to the railway station, the railway workshops and adjacent buildings, and the petrol station in the vicinity. They also destroyed the distillery and water supply systems at the station.[29] A witness from Kobryn writes that a drunken Circassian went back on his desire to burn down a house after forcing a bribe of 100 roubles.[30] Cossacks raged through Telechany, beating and robbing Jews, finally setting the town on fire, reducing it to ashes. The civilians hid in the nearby forests and spent the Yom Kippur festival there.[31] At Prużany, a citizens' committee handed out various goods to Russian soldiers to prevent robberies and rapine. They also paid the commander of a Cossack

[24] *Pinkas fun finf kehilot*, p. 375.

[25] In 1913, 57,068 people lived in Brest-Litovsk, including 39,152 Jews, 10,042 Russians and 7536 Poles. The evacuation of Brest was ordered on 1 August 1915 and carried out on 3–5 August. For the next three weeks, the military plundered houses, and set the city on fire on 24–25 August, just before their retreat; cf. *Entsyklopedias fun Galut-Lender: Brisk-D'Lite*, pp. 102–03; Mondalski, *Brześć Podlaski*, pp. 90–91.

[26] *Pinkas Byten*, pp. 45, 94.

[27] *Yizkor-buch fun der yidisher kehila in Kamin-Koshirski un umgegent*, Tel Aviv 1965, p. 638.

[28] *Toizn yor Pinsk*, p. 181.

[29] Ibid.

[30] *Kobrin Zamlbukh*, p. 202.

[31] *Telekhaner Yizkor-buch*, pp. 53–54, 97–98, 112.

unit to refrain from burning down the main synagogue.[32] The same happened in Drohiczyn Poleski and all the other towns. The civilian population hid from the Cossacks in various corners of their farmyards or in the forests.[33] A militia was set up at Prużany, clashing with individual Russian marauders trying to rob them while passing through the town. This was possible because several hundred men volunteered to join the group. The militia carried out the orders of an *ad hoc* Civic Committee composed of two Jews and two Christians. The disappearance of the Russian army was not a worry to some, or perhaps even most of the Jewish population. Nevertheless, upon the news of the approaching Germans, many of them fled from the Byteń *shtetl* to Kosów Poleski, Słonim and Baranowicze.

The Russian army forced several million Belarusian and Ukrainian peasants, workers from factories or state institutions to evacuate the western governorates, together with their families. They could only take a small part of their belongings on the road. The peasants' farms and the crops they had gathered, the houses and apartments abandoned in the cities, were all left unattended. Judging by the descriptions, the tsarist army in western Polesie was not interested in taking the Jewish population with it, although it plundered and burned their houses in many places. This did not happen everywhere, however. Among other places, the destruction of August and September 1915 bypassed the village of Kosów Poleski. During an exchange of fire between the opposing sides, only a few houses were destroyed there. The town also avoided plunder by the soldiers, which meant the inhabitants had more resources than the Jews from other shtetls in the subsequent period.[34]

The descriptions show that the Jewish population was generally not afraid of the Germans. At Pińsk on 16 September 1915, crowds poured out into the streets, where the invading troops were watched, announcements from the authorities were read, and concerts of military orchestras were attended.[35] The Jews only hid in the cellars when a rumour spread about a successful Russian counterattack near Łohiszyn; before their eyes they had a vision of a new Cossack invasion and a new

[32] *Pinkas fun der shtot Pruzhanee*, pp. 199–200.
[33] *Drohichyn*, pp. 66–67; *Gedenk-bukh fun Kamenets-Litovsk*, p. 434.
[34] *Pinkas Byten*, p. 133.
[35] *Toizn yor Pinsk*, p. 181.

wave of violence. One chronicler described the reaction of the Jewish inhabitants to the German army's invasion of Drohiczyn Poleski in this way: "The joy was so great that some Jews kissed the marching Germans".[36] One exception to the majority of the reports came from Bereza Kartuska, where the occupying forces – Germans, Austrians and Hungarians – were called robbers, and great damage resulted from the fierce fighting in this area between the enemy forces.[37]

Most of western Polesie, that is the area stretching between Brest, Pińsk and Łuninec, was captured by the German army, but Austro-Hungarian troops also appeared in some places. Such was the case in Brest, Kamieniec Litewski, Prużany and Bereza Kartuska.[38] The Austro-Hungarian army occupied western Polesie among other areas, but due to the concentration of their activities on the Galician front and the areas to the south of it, the Central Powers' main forces in Polesie consisted of German formations.[39] In the area under discussion, they formed the so-called *Heeresgruppe Woyrsch*, named after their commander Remus von Woyrsch. Moreover, the authors of Polish-Jewish memoirs write most often about German, not Austro-Hungarian soldiers.

The German-Austrian offensive soon stalled, and after a few weeks, in September, the front stabilised along a line of the river Szczara, the Ogiński canal, and the rivers Jasiołda, Styr and Stochod.[40] This front line lasted until February 1918. At that time, the warring sides expanded their fortifications, and the monotony of this eastern version of trench warfare was interrupted by scouts, artillery fire, machine gun fire or aerial bombardment.[41] In February 1918, another offensive by the Central Powers' armies began, during which the emperors' troops occupied territory as far as a line stretching between the Gulf of Finland and the city of Rostov-on-Don.

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[36] *Drohichyn*, p. 67.

[37] *Pinkas fun finf kehilot*, pp. 341, 362.

[38] *Entsyklopedias fun Galut-Lender: Brisk-D'Lite*, p. 104; *Gedenk-bukh fun Kamenets-Litovsk*, p. 430; *Pinkas fun finf kehilot*, p. 341.

[39] S. Czerep, *Bitwa pod Łuckiem*, Białystok 2003, p. 161.

[40] *Yizkor-buch fun der yidisher kehila in Kamin-Koshirski*, p. 739; *Yizkor Kehilot Luniniets / Kozhanhorodok*, Tel Aviv 1952, p. 114; A. Kryszko, *Moje wspomnienia z Polesia*, Santok 2009, p. 7; J. Rubacha, 'Korpus Landwehry w bojach o Baranowicze latem 1916 r.', *Słupskie Studia Historyczne* 2010, no. 16, pp. 73–74.

[41] Among other places, the Germans bombed the railway junction in Łuniniec, see *Yizkor Kehilot Luniniets / Kozhanhorodok*, p. 114.

One of the consequences of this offensive was that the whole of Polesie now came under the control of the German occupation authorities.

Although it is not obvious, the factor which determined the new situation in the western part of Polesie was the formal equality guaranteed to Jews in the German Empire from 1871 and their good treatment in the Austro--Hungarian Empire. This standard determined the generally correct behaviour of the officer class, and also influenced their subordinates. There were other very important reasons for the relatively good treatment of the Jewish population by the occupation forces. German military circles saw the anti-Semitism of the Russian state as a factor in winning over Russian Jews to fight against the tsarist regime.[42] Shortly after crossing the borders of the Kingdom of Poland in August 1914, a leaflet was distributed on its territory in which the Germans called on the Jewish population from Poland, Lithuania, Belarus, Volhynia and Podolia to fight tsarist Russia. In addition to the several million Poles on these territories, Berlin and Vienna saw the several million Jews there as potential allies who would turn against the monarchy of Tsar Nicholas II due to the grievances they had suffered.[43] Hence, their Jewish fellow citizens on the Spree and the Danube were given every assurance that the fate of their fellow believers in the East would be radically improved by victory for the Central Powers, and that the main manifestation of this would be both formal and real equality. Jewish organisations established in Germany to help their fellows in the East also conducted an information campaign in this spirit.[44]

Orthodox Jews in Eastern Europe – both Hasidim and adherents of rabbinic Judaism – were so exotic to Germans of various denominations that it was necessary to publish brochures containing some basic information about this community.[45] In the first month of the war, the Zionists established the German Committee

[42] The head of the intelligence of the German army during the First World War recommended recruiting Jews as a valuable group who would have information useful from a military point of view (S. Lewicki, *Canaris w Madrycie*, Warsaw 1989, p. 15).

[43] E. Zechlin, *Die deutsche Politik und die Juden im Ersten Weltkrieg*, Göttingen 1969, p. 121; J. Nalewajko-Kulikov, 'Die jiddische Schule der Erwachsenen: Warsaw Yiddish Press and German--Jewish Contacts in 1915–18', *Acta Poloniae Historica* 2016, vol. 113, pp. 91–92.

[44] One columnist wrote in terms of the 'holy defensive war' Germany was waging against Russia as an opportunity to liberate all peoples under the tsar's yoke, including Jews. According to the author, these nationalities were looking forward to this liberation (W. Kaplun-Kogan, *Der Krieg. Eine Schicksalstunde des jüdischen Volkes*, Berlin 1915, p. 4).

[45] N. Birnbaum, *Was sind Ostjuden. Zur ersten Information*, Vienna 1916.

for the Freeing of Russian Jews (*Deutsches Komitee zur Befreiung der russischen Juden*). Those Germans of the 'Mosaic faith' who did not support the Zionists established a separate German Association for the Interests of East European Jews (*Deutsche Vereinigung für die Interessen der osteuropäischen Juden*), while the religious Orthodox founded the Free Association for the Interests of Orthodox Jewry (*Freie Vereinigung für die Interessen des orthodoxen Judentum*). In Vienna, on the other hand, the Committee for the Explanation of the East Jewish Question was established.

In the territories occupied by Germany and Austria-Hungary, efforts to win over the local Jews were made, and to provide them with charitable aid at the same time. Jewish-German activists convinced political decision-makers and the society of the Reich that the Eastern Jews, through the Yiddish language, were associated with the German language and culture, and should even be treated as spokesmen for German among the local population. The Zionists in particular called for supporting activities aimed at strengthening the Jewish community, through the consent of the government in Berlin to the functioning of its ethnic institutions.[46]

Interestingly, given the German Jews' relatively strong interest in the East, their activity in that area was not reflected in the notes of Jewish diarists from Polesie.[47] In the context under discussion, however, the most important thing is that none of the mentioned initiatives concerning the so-called Eastern Jews (*Ostjuden*) would have been possible had it not been for the consent of the governments of the Central Powers, as well as the commanders of their armies.

Thirteen field rabbis were sent to the eastern front; they were to provide spiritual protection not only to German and Austro-Hungarian soldiers of the 'Mosaic faith', but also to help in establishing contact with eastern Jews.[48] It should be noted, however, that no witness mentioned meeting any such rabbis in the reports from Polesie.

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[46] Ibid., pp. 11–12.

[47] The memoirs of Lt Jakob Mestel testify to the fact that there were contacts between Jewish soldiers from the occupation forces and local Jews. Both he and his Jewish subordinates spent Passover 1916 with the local Jews (J. Mestel, *Milkhome-notitzn fun a yiddishe ofitsir*, vol. 2, Warsaw 1924, pp. 204–06).

[48] In addition to the rabbis on the eastern front, about 40,000 German soldiers of Jewish origin served in the army (G. Dryer, 'Stranger Lands: Politics, Ethnicity and Occupation on the Eastern Front, 1914–1918', *Rice Historical Review*, Spring 2018, p. 17, https://scholarship.rice.edu/bitstream/handle/1911/101526/Dreyer-RHR-2018-Spring.pdf, accessed 13 February 2022).

In some places, attempts were made to document the good relations between the army and the representatives of the Jewish community. For example, the German commandant in Drohiczyn Poleski had photos taken during the visits by representatives of the City Committee to his office, and sent them to his superiors in Berlin. These photographs were intended to serve as material illustrating the good treatment of civilians by the occupying administration.[49]

Bearing in mind the policy of winning Jews over for the occupation forces, one must not forget about the sense of superiority which the German officer cadre felt over the conquered populations, including the eastern Jews.[50] Due to the subject of this work, I omit any discussion of how the officers (and people of aristocratic origin in general) referred to the peasants in Polesie, who were most often illiterate and lived in very poor conditions. The noble officers were certainly not interested in any form of fraternisation. Sometimes the arrogance of even the lower-ranking soldiers made itself felt. At Pińsk, civilians had to give way to German officers and bow to them.[51] The principle of collective responsibility was applied; for example, an argument between a merchant and a soldier led to the imposition upon the entire population of a fine ('contribution') of 10,000 roubles.[52] Cases of military lawlessness were reported, such as when German soldiers tried to force a Jewish girl to pose naked for a photo; when she refused to do so, they beat her up.[53] Officers and gendarmes quite often used whips and snares to make the conquered population realise who the master of the situation was. These blows also fell on the Jews. Austro-Hungarian Lieutenant Jakob Mestel points out that the Jews who fled from the area controlled by the German army appeared in his area because they believed that the regime in the territories occupied by Franz Joseph's soldiers was easier. When a German patrol confiscated seventeen head of cattle from the Jews,

[49] *Drohichyn*, p. 71.

[50] Elsewhere, at least some distance towards Jews was shown, even in relations between the allies. The Austrian army officer Jakow Mestel recalls that when his unit arrived in Brest-Litovsk in the summer of 1916, Paul von Hindenburg invited the Austrian-Hungarian commander for dinner, but the Austrian colonel's adjutant, a Hungarian Jew, was not invited. The same witness highlighted the order given by the German commander of Brest that Central Commission officers should indicate their nationality and religion, which was not – as he recalled – a habit practiced in their parent units (Mestel, *Milkhome-notitzn*, p. 228).

[51] *Toizn yor Pinsk*, p. 183.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Mestel, *Milkhome-notitzn*, pp. 208–09.

they were not returned until Mestel intervened.[54] German soldiers at the border post robbed Jews of their legally purchased grain, and additionally beat them with whips until they bled.[55]

One author describing the Jewish population emphasised their predominance in trade and crafts, but at the same time noted: "All their [the Jews'] enterprises are small and poor, and their life still reaches no farther than the narrow area of the ghetto".[56] This finding does not suggest that the author placed Eastern Jews on a high level of the social hierarchy, and the final wording seems to indicate that for him they were a kind of relic left over from past centuries, when it was common for the Jewish population to function in dense clusters of ghettoes. For a German who came from the Reich in 1915, this phenomenon was something entirely unknown.

Regarding the Jews, they were rumoured to indulge in illegal trading activities, smuggling or using bribes to settle their affairs.[57] These ideas were not detached from reality, but partially constituted an anti-Semitic generalisation. While some Jews used bribery and smuggling in their struggle to survive, there were also those who did not know how to use such methods, and suffered great poverty. The authors of the anti-Semitic generalisations spread among the occupiers disregarded the conditions created by the war (and therefore partly by themselves), which had forced the local people to use various tactics to fight for survival in a devastated, degraded space. In addition, the examples given below show that the local population soon learned that some soldiers were susceptible to material arguments in the form of bribes. This knowledge survived until the next war. Army Lieutenant Jakob Mestel, being responsible for an area of about 200 sq km in the vicinity of Prużany, noted how the local population competed for military favours in order to ensure more favourable conditions to function in their difficult reality. Bribes were offered – including to him – for reasons including turning a blind eye to smuggling across the southern border of the so-called *Oberost*.[58] Mestel cited a situation when a German patrol confiscated several cattle from

[54] Ibid., p. 225.

[55] Ibid., p. 223.

[56] B. Brandt, *Geographischer Bilderatlas des polnisch-weißrussischen Grenzgebiets*, Berlin 1918, p. 42.

[57] L. Kasmach, 'Forgotten occupation: Germans and Belarusians in the Lands of the *Ober Ost* (1915–17)', *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 2016, vol. 58, no. 4, p. 325.

[58] Mestel, *Milkhome-notitzn*, pp. 218–20.

the Jews. Admittedly they were returned after an Austrian officer intervened, but just in case, the victims left the Germans a calf as a 'gift' in order not to spoil their relations with them, which the 'recipients' accepted.[59] A witness who remembered life in Bereza Kartuska at that time emphasised that the need to live forced the locals to search for ways to deal with everyday problems. Leather and textiles were brought from Pińsk, whose inhabitants were near starvation, to Drohiczyn Poleski, and food was taken from the countryside. Sometimes such transports were 'covered' by a uniformed German soldier, and a pass was issued for a bribe. In this way, Drohiczyn also received goods from Brest, Biała Podlaska and Międzyrzec Podlaski. Bribes were also paid for the smuggling of goods between the *Oberost* and Polesie. Some Jews began to act as intermediaries, because thanks to the similarity of Yiddish to German they could communicate more easily with the occupiers than the Polesie peasants. Business permits were obtained, and some wartime 'businessmen' went on business trips to Warsaw, among other places.[60] Another tactic for developing relations with the Germans and Austrians was to report to them about people who were violating the occupation bans and orders.

The occupier granted the status of 'dependent populations' to all the relevant religious and national groups in the area in question, in implementation of the tasks as defined in Berlin and Vienna. Polesie was to provide what was necessary for the war economy: accommodation and food for soldiers, draft animals and stables, as well as forage and yards for them, not to mention human labour, either without payment or for merely a symbolic remuneration. Part of the Polish population was involved in this economy, and the rest had to leave or vegetate on the spot, suffering from shortages for over three years. The policy of the occupiers – especially the Germans – can be defined in two terms: the plunder of natural resources and property, and the exploitation of human resources.[61] All actions concerning

[59] Ibid., p. 225.

[60] *Pinkas fun finf kehilot*, p. 341.

[61] In 1919, the magistrate in Brest issued a communiqué in which we read, "After the occupation of Brest by German troops, the rest of the property left behind (both public institutions and private persons) was confiscated and transported to Prussia. Even the remaining walls of the buildings were demolished, and the bricks were taken away" (D. Zagadzki, 'Okręg Korpusu Nr 9 na Polesiu (1921–1939)', trans. E. Lickiewicz, *Echa Polesia* 2012, no. 3, p. 28). The Bavarian Prince Leopold resided in the palace in Skoki near Brest, as Commander of the German Eastern Front (from 1916). When he left his quarters, the German army plundered the property (*Echa Polesia* 2005, no. 3, p. 24).

the civilians were subordinated to the needs of the army and the German state. To meet these needs effectively, a system of communication with the conquered population was created. Local translators – Jews – were helpful in this. Attempts were made to reach the locals in other ways as well. For example, in Brest, information for the city's residents was announced by means of posters in four languages: Yiddish, German, Polish and Russian. At the railway station, there were texts of railway and station regulations, which were printed in Yiddish, among other languages.[62]

The Germans did not want too many civilians, especially those incapable of work, to remain behind the front lines. They were seen as unnecessary consumers and as causes of various problems. Starving civilians deprived of drugs were susceptible to disease, which additionally posed an epidemiological threat to the military.[63]

After Brest was taken, the Germans first quickly put out the fires which the Russians had started, and then quickly deported to the Congress Kingdom most of those inhabitants who the Russians were unable to displace, as well as those who had returned to the city as soon as the tsarist army left it. The civilians were scattered around various towns west of the Bug.[64] The Germans designated all of Brest for military use, and also set up a large prisoner of war camp there.[65] People returning to their hometown were only allowed to stay there after the conclusion of peace agreements with the Ukrainian People's Republic and Bolshevik Russia in February and March 1918, when the line separating the troops of the central states from the Russian ones was shifted much further west. Those who returned had to stay in a few houses of prayer or other provisionally adapted rooms, because the surviving houses were still occupied by the German army.[66] While the city had had over 57,000 inhabitants before the war, in November 1918 only around 12,000 or so were left. These certainly included Jews among them, since in the first city

[62] The witness saw the aforementioned posters and regulations in Brest in the summer of 1916 (Mestel, *Milkhome-notitzn*, p. 227).

[63] In Drohiczyn Poleski, most refugees from the Kingdom of Poland and Brest-Litovsk died of typhus (*Drohichyn*, p. 68).

[64] K. Nowik, *Di shtot Brisk*, New York 1973, p. 12.

[65] *Entsyklopedias fun Galut-Lender: Brisk-D'Lite*, p. 104. Jakob Mestel recalled that in 1916 the few houses that had survived stood empty, with no furnishings. In the twon, among others, a large brothel for soldiers was set up, where several dozen prostitutes worked (Mestel, *Milkhome-notitzn*, p. 228).

[66] Nowik, *Di shtot Brisk*, p. 12.

board appointed under Polish rule after the Germans' withdrawal on 9 February 1919, at least two members of the Jewish faith were among the six lay judges supporting the mayor.[67] One of the witnesses saw civilian workers wearing yellow signs on their clothes in Brest in 1916, which he associated with the marking of Jews in the Middle Ages; it should be remembered that this account was published in Warsaw in 1924, and not after the Second World War.[68]

A clear example of the Germans using radical measures to resolve the problems arising from the presence of 'redundant' civilians is what happened at Pińsk. When the town was occupied by the Germans it had around 30,000 civilians. Food became scarce very quickly, so the Germans decided to displace as many people westward as possible. For example, no impediments were put in the way of those refugees from the Kingdom who decided to return home. The refugees who had been displaced to Prużany returned to Jedwabne and Nowy Dwór, among other places.[69] Several thousand such people left Pińsk in the early autumn of 1915. The obligation to organise the transfer of persons deemed 'unnecessary' was transferred to the Citizens' Committee headed by Dr. Aleksander Luria;[70] he appointed an Evacuation Commission (EC) divided into two sections. The Jewish section organised the departures of Jews and Russians, and the Polish section organised the Poles' journeys. When the city's military commander considered the number of people dispatched to be too low, he imposed a relatively high fine on the EC, amounting to 3000 roubles. In July 1917, the Germans announced that another 3000 people had to leave Pińsk, and either find places for themselves in the nearby villages or cross the Bug.[71] The list, which was once again drawn up by the EC, included about 200 reservists, former soldiers of the Russian army.

The provision of food and accommodation in the Kingdom of Poland was also difficult, so the people arriving there, if they did not have the support of family or friends, became homeless wanderers. The reports which came from them back to Polesie significantly weakened the interest in migration. The resulting decrease

[67] These jurors were Zelman Tenenbaum and Aron Matecki (Mondalski, *Brześć Podlaski*, p. 96).

[68] Mestel, *Milkhome-notitzn*, p. 228.

[69] *Pinkas fun der shtot Pruzhanee*, p. 207.

[70] From December 1915 to 16 May 1916, 9828 people of various denominations were displaced westwards from Pińsk (*Toizn yor Pinsk*, p. 186).

[71] *Toizn yor Pinsk*, p. 191.

in the number of people willing to leave caused dissatisfaction in the German administration. In the face of this passive resistance, the occupier forced the Emigration Committee to name people who were to leave Pińsk. These people were then detained by patrols consisting of soldiers and members of the city militia, forcibly brought to the railway station, and sent to the Bug.[72]

Here are some figures to illustrate the migratory movements at that time. The statistics available show the extent of the movements of the Jewish population in western Polesie, caused by the First World War and the military clashes of 1919–20.[73] In 1913, 39,152 Jews lived in Brest, while the census of 1921 showed only 15,630 people of this nationality resident in the city.[74] Whereas the town of Byteń had been inhabited by about 1500 Jewish people before the war, according to the post-war census only 539 remained. Some of the former inhabitants of Polesie returned after wandering for several years after the war. In the years 1921–24 alone, this inflow amounted to around 190,000 people.[75] At Prużany, in the face of the severe epidemic situation, which was caused *inter alia* by the accumulation of thousands of people whom the Russians had expelled from Brest, the Germans forced many people to leave the city, while on the other hand trying to minimise the spread of infectious diseases by organising forced delousing actions.[76] People from Telechany who had been made homeless by fire were displaced beyond the Bug, whence they were sent on to Łomża, Maków Mazowiecki and Ostrołęka. These exiles began to return to their hometown from the summer of 1917. Interestingly, at that time the Germans allowed them to return, even though they had no interest in how the returnees fared. They lived in barracks built by the Germans for lumberjacks; at first they ate what they could find in the forest, and later they bought food in the vicinity of Motło and Kosów Poleski, while at the same time they prepared for the next year by cultivating the fields abandoned by the peasants.[77] Besides, they were only doing what their neighbours had been doing for two years with the permission of the occupiers.

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[72] Ibid., p. 187.
[73] *Pinkas Byten*, pp. 18, 20.
[74] *Entsyklopedias fun Galut-Lender: Brisk-D'Lite*, p. 102.
[75] J. Niezbrzycki, *Polesie. Opis wojskowo-geograficzny i studium terenu*, Warszawa 1930, p. 303.
[76] *Pinkas fun der shtot Pruzhane*, pp. 203, 207.
[77] *Telekhaner Yizkor-buch*, p. 54.

People coped as best they could with the lack of housing. In Antopol, those whose houses had been burned down by the Russian army seized the homes of evacuated Christians.[78] It was similar in the village of Zastawie near Kamieniec Litewski, and also in Byteń, with at least one of the local families moving into an abandoned cottage in a nearby village.[79] Some residents of Drohiczyn Poleski did the same.[80] In Telechany, some of the victims moved to the nearby town of Motol.[81] In some places, those Jews whose houses had been destroyed began to demolish the peasants' buildings and used the material obtained in this way to build new habitats on their plots of land.[82] In the context of these considerations, it is important to recall that none of these remedial actions could have been implemented without the consent of the German military administration.

Regardless of the forced migrations mentioned above, there was a need to provide supplies to those people who had remained behind in Polesie. The problem was serious, since despite these migratory movements, in mid-1917 there were still 12,000–13,000 civilians resident at Pińsk itself. To solve this problem, and to free themselves from any obligations at the same time, the military allowed the local Jewish population to cultivate the land abandoned by the peasants. This began as early as September 1915. According to one witness, the Jews in the vicinity of Prużany survived the winter of 1915–16 only thanks to the crops which had been left behind by the displaced peasants.[83] The Jews used the supplies gathered in farm buildings, and also began collecting crops from fields, gardens and orchards, and catching fish from ponds and lakes.[84] They grazed cattle and goats on the peasants' lands, thanks to which they were able to enrich their diet. The Jewish population of Bereza Kartuska stripped the peasants' fields and farms of everything that could be eaten. The first winter during the occupation was awaited with anxiety.[85] Describing the behaviour of the people in Drohiczyn Poleski, a witness pointed

[78] *Antopol. Sefer-yizkor*, Tel Aviv 1972, pp. 14, 575, 627.

[79] *Pinkas Byten*, pp. 104, 117; *Gedenk-bukh fun Kamenets-Litovsk*, p. 397.

[80] *Drohichyn*, p. 70.

[81] *Telekhaner Yizkor-buch*, pp. 17–18.

[82] This was the case in Drohiczyn Poleski (*Drohichyn*, pp. 68–70).

[83] Mestel, *Milkhome-notitzn*, pp. 186, 197.

[84] In Drohiczyn, the Jews not only took what was left in the granaries, but also found the supplies hidden by the peasants in the farmyards or in pits dug in the fields (*Drohichyn*, p. 68).

[85] *Pinkas fun finf kehilot*, p. 377.

out that the townspeople dug up the peasants' potatoes and vegetables *en masse*, and then moved them to their places of residence. These guaranteed their survival during autumn, winter and spring. As stated in the testimony, even the rabbi dug up potatoes and brought them home with his family. Those who did not join these grassroots activities were the first to starve.[86] In the context of Janów Poleski, the witness writes that the Germans assigned peasant fields to individual Jewish families and ordered them to be cultivated; they introduced this obligation in September 1915.[87] At Pińsk, permission for this type of gathering was issued by the town commander.[88] He was aware that he could not impose order in the face of shortages of supplies for the civilian population. The more resourceful of them even began to exchange the surpluses of the food obtained in this way for other necessary goods.[89] As a consequence, there were occasional quarrels between civilians over the right to participate in the digging. As we know, the field work was supervised by German soldiers, and the civilian population had to be satisfied with what was left after the Germans received their share. In order to harvest the crops in the following years, it was necessary to obtain a permit from the Germans to carry out field work on land belonging to 'absent natural persons' or which had been owned by the Russian state. The civilians ate practically no meat, and potatoes and other vegetables became the basis of their diet. The lack of grain resulted in a shortage of bread.[90] It should be emphasised that not all Jews had the opportunity to use the supplies left by the peasants. Single elderly people could not carry much on their backs from the fields and places where food was stored.[91]

In spring 1916, the inhabitants of western Polesie, including many Jews, suffered from hunger, both in the small town of Byteń and in the much larger Pińsk.[92] In the latter, an order was issued in spring 1917 for all available spaces to be put to agricultural and horticultural use. In the following months, the population was busy planting and growing food plants. Significantly, the German authorities did

[86] *Drohichyn*, p. 69.
[87] *Yanov al-Yad Pinsk. Sefer zikharon*, Jerusalem 1968, p. 76.
[88] *Toizn yor Pinsk*, p. 182.
[89] *Pinkas Byten*, p. 104.
[90] Ibid., p. 107.
[91] Ibid., p. 129.
[92] Ibid., p. 131.

not allow civilians to harvest the crops freely. The harvest was carried out under the control of the army, which kept some of the products for their own needs. At Pińsk, the occupiers took over the sale of potatoes, in order to prevent speculation. According to the chronicler, the harvest of 1916 was good and the warehouses were full of food, but civilians still went hungry because the Germans took over the distribution of the produce.[93] One inhabitant of Byteń remembered that they allowed the locals to collect only the ears that fell to the ground during harvesting. However, most of the food collected was sent to the Reich.[94] The Austrian army not only allowed civilians to cultivate abandoned fields, but even lent them grain to sow, potatoes to plant and horses to work on the land.[95] The Germans at Prużany and nearby towns, including Malecz and Szereszów, did not want to bear the burden of supporting the refugees, and so they ordered them to work in the field there; and in places where there were no draft animals, men and women had to act as the labour force, pulling ploughs, harrows and carts.[96]

In spring 1917, the population resumed work in the fields and gardens, but when harvest time came, it turned out that the occupiers had acted even more ruthlessly than a year earlier in seizing all the agricultural products and taking full control over their distribution. This was due to the great food supply problems in the Reich, where food shortages had become the lot of millions of German families, and as a consequence, the cause of the first social unrest, including soldiers' revolts. In a situation where there were insufficient supplies for their compatriots, the Germans had little mercy for the conquered population. But they had to deliver them something. They found a solution in producing food with admixtures of substances that were not normally consumed. They added ground chestnuts, oak and beech acorns, potato peelings, and even sawdust to the flour intended for baking bread.[97] Once again, displacement was used as a tool to reduce the number of people who needed to be fed.

Members of civic committees selected from among the local population were ordered to assist in achieving the occupiers' goals and needs. In smaller towns,

[93] *Toizn yor Pinsk*, p. 188.
[94] *Pinkas Byten*, p. 90.
[95] Mestel, *Milkhome-notitzn*, pp. 214–15.
[96] *Pinkas fun der shtot Pruzhane*, p. 209.
[97] *Toizn yor Pinsk*, p. 188.

Jews constituted the majority of their members, including at Pińsk.[98] In Drohiczyn Poleski, the German commandant appointed a Jewish refugee from Łódź as mayor and another Jew as his deputy. After some time, the population began to demand a change of mayor. Although the commander did not do so, he appointed a City Committee composed of the town's most respected citizens, whose task was to supervise the work of the town's master; this committee also included Jews.[99] In the memoirs from Byteń there is a report that "Jewish militiamen" were used to gather forced labourers.[100] There were only four of them in Drohiczyn,[101] while at Pińsk the Citizens' Committee had a 'town militia', whose ranks initially numbered as many as 120 people, although the Germans quickly reduced their number to 20. This group's tasks included keeping order among the civilians, supervising the town's sanitary status, maintaining the contingents of forced labourers by the occupiers, and informing the German authorities about any forbidden behaviour, such as hiding food supplies.[102] At Prużany, as early as September 1915, the military commander established a Citizens' Committee and a Town Council that was given a twenty-strong auxiliary police unit consisting of local men: seventeen Jews, two Poles and one Ruthenian. All the municipal institutions were managed by Jews under the dictation of successive military commanders of the town. In spring 1916 the civil administration was reconstructed, and a German soldier with the rank of sergeant was appointed mayor. In Bereza Kartuska, the Germans gave the mayoralty to one Berl Rybak, who had held public offices continuously since 1882. Due to his advanced age, he was assigned a deputy in the person of Naftali Lewinson. Also there, the magistrate had an auxiliary militia composed of local people at its disposal.[103]

The example of Pińsk demonstrates the attitude which at least some German commanders held towards the members of these newly established bodies of local administration. After the destruction of Brest, Pińsk was now the largest town in the area in question. Inhabitants of Polish, Jewish and Russian nationalities

[98] Ibid., pp. 191–93.
[99] *Drohichyn*, p. 70.
[100] *Pinkas Byten*, p. 117.
[101] *Drohichyn*, p. 69.
[102] *Toizn yor Pinsk*, p. 184.
[103] *Pinkas fun finf kehilot*, p. 423.

joined the provisional Citizens' Committee. Initially, it was headed by a Pole, Borysewicz, but later it was led by Jews. No office space was allocated to the Citizens' Committee. Only two people were allowed to enter the building of the German headquarters: the newly appointed mayor, Dr. Aleksander Lurie, and the head of the 'city militia', known only as 'Sz. Wol.' – but only at the request of the Germans. When Lurie left for Vienna, his duties were first taken over by 'Sz. Wol.', and then by Sz[ymon] Lewin. In 1916 the Committee's members protested against various decisions taken by the local occupation authorities, and even resigned in protest, but the commandant completely ignored it. At one point mayor Lewin was arrested and imprisoned in a camp in Germany, but the chronicler did not know the reasons for this act. It is known, however, that another Jew was also appointed Lewin's successor.[104]

At Prużany, the German commanders behaved differently. One of them did not accept any explanations, and demanded that his orders, such as supplying equipment to the officers' quarters, be followed to the letter; one witness described him as 'a typical German Junker'. Another professional officer who served in the imperial colonial units behaved similarly, while a third commandant, a reservist and an intellectual, was definitely less overbearing.[105] Unfortunately, the one with the colonial past stayed in the town the longest, and mistreated the members of municipal institutions, insulting them and forcing them to make payments in gold under the threat of sending residents to camps in the Reich. To enforce payment, he kept the members of the Citizens' Committee in custody, and the soldiers carried out his orders very brutally, beating the detainees with rifle butts. The activists and city officials were released only after paying a ransom of 600 roubles in gold.[106]

After capturing Pińsk, the German commandant ordered six hostages to be taken from among the respected inhabitants of the city. Among them there were three Jews and three Poles, including Fr. Kazimierz Bukraba.[107] Shortly after the incident, in October, all the men who had been interrogated were summoned

[104] *Toizn yor Pinsk*, p. 193.
[105] *Pinkas fun der shtot Pruzhane*, pp. 204–05.
[106] Ibid., pp. 205–06.
[107] *Toizn yor Pinsk*, p. 180.

to the marketplace. It went on all day. Eventually, sixty people were arrested and sent to a camp in the Reich.[108] We do not know what charges were laid against them.

For most Germans, the Orthodox Jews of Polesie (both the Hasidim and the followers of rabbinic Judaism) were an exotic phenomenon. When a wedding took place in Byteń in accordance with the customs of the 'Mosaic religion', the local German commandant treated the ceremony as a very interesting folkloric event, and ordered a photo of the wedding guests to be taken.[109] The witnesses emphasise that the same officer publicly showed respect to the local rabbi, who also had an excellent command of the German language. This rabbi often acted as a spokesman for the Jewish community to the commandant. But this dialogue disappeared when the military wanted to carry out activities in the manner they deemed to be optimal. In such cases, they even allowed the desecration of prayer houses. In 1918, they decided to relocate about 800 Russian prisoners of war to the main synagogue at Pińsk, as it was easier to guard them there. The Jews' requests to at least empty the rooms of liturgical equipment fell on deaf ears. The Russians were locked in the synagogue, leading to its pollution and devastation. At Prużany, houses of prayer were turned into field hospitals for the POWs, and a labour camp was set up in one of the local *beit midrashi*.[110]

Jakob Mestel performed his duties in the town near Prużany. His superior, whom he calls the poviat commander, was another Imperial-Royal army officer. The local rabbi asked the commander to allow Jews to work on Sundays, not Saturdays, in order to prevent violations of the Sabbath. The soldier unceremoniously kicked the rabbi out of his office.[111] Moreover, the same officer resented Mestel for treating the local Jews well. The accounts show that he was an anti-Semite, who decided to provoke actions which would distress the Jews. Earlier, for example, he advised a certain peasant woman that she should sell the horses from her property to a Jewish trader before the imperial-royal army seized them. When the deal was completed, the Jew was arrested for hiding horses needed by the occupation forces. It should be emphasised, however, that the way in which the commandant dealt

[108] Ibid., pp. 181–82.
[109] *Pinkas Byten*, p. 19.
[110] *Pinkas fun der shtot Pruzhane*, p. 214.
[111] Mestel, *Milkhome-notitzn*, p. 226.

with the rabbi led to the high command transferring him to another area. This may suggest that the brutal treatment of a person respected by the local community was considered a mistake, and as an act which ran contrary to the rules of conduct, which were designed to win over the local Jews, and not alienate them.

A curfew was introduced across the entire area. In summer, it was in force at Pińsk from 7.00 p.m. to 5 a.m., but sometimes – as a punishment – the ban on going out to the streets was in force from 6 p.m. Mentions of curfews also come from Kamieniec Litewski, among other places.[112] Army and gendarme patrols were constantly circulating in the area. Posts set up on the roads and town outskirts checked whether travellers had passes issued by the army.[113] At Pińsk, the identity documents were all stamped during a signal day. German stamps and descriptions were placed on the photographs that each of the residents was to present in the commandant's office. After this procedure was completed, the military entered all the town's houses during a single night, and registered the men aged 18–45. Sometimes the occupiers even interfered with the towns' names; for example, they renamed the town of Byteń to Klein-Biten so that their compatriots would not confuse it with Beuthen (Bytom) in Silesia.[114]

One of the factors determining the German decisions was the distance of a given locality from the front line. At Pińsk, the population was ordered to leave the houses located by the Pina River, because the Russians still occupied some areas on the other side. For about two and a half years German soldiers owned these buildings, and civilians were forbidden to approach the streets near the fortification line. The owners re-occupied the ruined houses in the spring of 1918, after the German offensive had pushed the Russian army further east. From then on, only those buildings that served as fortified points of resistance in the event of a Russian counteroffensive remained under military control. Certain elements of the occupation regime were also relaxed, such as the curfew; civilians were now allowed to stay in public places until 9 p.m.

Zones for the local population were designated, and people who entered them without permission were punished. In Drohiczyn Poleski, people who were stopped

[112] *Gedenk-bukh fun Kamenets-Litovsk*, p. 448.
[113] *Kobrin Zamlbukh*, pp. 116–17.
[114] *Pinkas Byten*, p. 21.

in the forbidden area risk being tied to the bridge barrier and being left there in public view for many hours.[115] In the same town, flats could only be illuminated with a single lamp. One day, households were inspected on a Friday evening, and when it was found that Jewish homes were lit with more lights than allowed by the ordinance, it was decided to use intimidation. The Jewish women were ordered to come to the market square the next day, where they were lined up and made to stand there for four hours. Military gendarmes, fully armed, surrounded them.[116] Such events explain what one witness meant when he wrote: "As soon as the situation stabilised, the people felt the iron hand of Prussian rule on them".[117] A resident of Drohiczyn Poleski complained about "German iron discipline"; he also used the phrase "the discipline of the German military" [*dyscyplina niemieckiej soldateski*]. He himself felt like a servant, compelled to obey any order without the right of refusal.[118] A resident of Byteń stated that the 39 months of German occupation were filled with persecution and humiliation,[119] and yet another wrote about "the slave-like German occupation" [*niewolnicza niemiecka okupacja*].[120]

In order to maintain obedience among the population, punishments were imposed in public. Near Prużany, several peasants accused of spying for Russia were shot in this way.[121] The soldiers from the field gendarmerie, who were easy to recognise by their metal, semi-circular breastplates (*Ringkragen*), were remembered the worst by the Jews. They were the ones who carried out searches and confiscations, and often referred to the inhabitants of Jewish nationality arrogantly and brutally, calling them all by the pejorative term *Mosieks* (*Moishlekh*). When performing counterintelligence functions, they used agents chosen from among local civilians of various nationalities.[122]

An Austrian Jewish officer heard complaints from a local Jew about the difficult financial situation related to the destruction of the area in 1915. In a nearby area controlled by the Germans, the situation was to be better, so the officer advised

[115] *Drohichyn*, p. 71.
[116] Ibid.
[117] *Toizn yor Pinsk*, p. 181.
[118] *Drohichyn*, p. 71.
[119] *Pinkas Byten*, p. 109.
[120] Ibid., p. 113.
[121] *Pinkas fun der shtot Pruzhane*, p. 212.
[122] Ibid., pp. 213–14.

him to move there. The interlocutor's reaction to this suggestion was very telling, as the old man exclaimed: "God forbid! It's much worse with them. They put you in jail for the smallest thing".[123]

Moreover, the Germans also behaved unceremoniously towards their allies. For example, they confiscated a transport of eggs for the Austrian officer's kitchen at Prużany, for which they paid 10,000 crowns; and after the Austrians protested, they not only failed to return the goods, but also paid them 'compensation' to the tune of… a mere 600 crowns.[124] So we may imagine how they reacted to the civilian population's complaints. When Lieutenant Mestel arrived at the railway station in Brest in autumn 1915, he noticed Jewish girls selling various products to passengers. The German conductor advised the Austrian soldiers not to pay them, because they were Jewish, and they would not be able to recover the dues after the train left the station.[125]

As already mentioned, earning money and food became serious problems. The former trade ties had been cut by the front line. Contact with the huge Russian market and the customers in the *Entente* countries disappeared. Many workplaces were closed, which meant that thousands of families lost their livelihoods.[126] Most of the peasant customers disappeared, hitting the local service market. Polesie had never been self-sufficient in terms of food, so grain used to be brought there from Volhynia and eastern parts of Ukraine.[127] In addition, the handicraft branch collapsed because the stocks of materials were either stolen or exhausted, and there were no new supplies. In order to transport any goods, one had to have a permit issued by the Germans, and these – as a witness from Byteń recalls – were very rarely granted.[128]

The occupiers introduced restrictions on the functioning of the economy, issuing concessions for the performance of manufacturing, commercial and other services (such as transport). Rationing of the sale of food, and of any materials and raw

[123] Mestel, *Milkhome-notitzn*, p. 187.

[124] Ibid.

[125] Ibid., p. 185.

[126] For example, until August 1915 in Byteń, there was a tannery, a weaving factory, a quilt and duvet factory. These firms ceased to operate at the beginning of the occupation (G. Minkowicz, *Fun Byten biz Yerushalaim*, Havana 1955, pp. 24, 37).

[127] Niezbrzycki, *Polesie*, p. 313.

[128] *Pinkas Byten*, p. 107.

materials useful to the Germans, was commonly applied. At Prużany, they seized goods from shops and wholesalers.[129] At Pińsk, the city commander introduced a ban on trading in food products, and ordered the store-holders to present their inventories to the military authorities. Only a few shops were left at the disposal of the civilians, and long lines began to form in front of them. There were no shops at all in Drohiczyn, and the distribution of food was handled by the municipal citizens' committee appointed by the Germans.[130] A trade ban was also introduced in Telechany and nearby Motol.[131] A resident of Byteń writes about a total ban on civilian trading in this town, and a radical restriction of the ability to travel. At Pińsk, the occupiers distributed 10 kg of flour per family, but it turned out that this generosity was due to the fact that the flour was spoiled and could not be used to make food. The Germans also seized kerosene supplies in the town, which plunged it into complete darkness after nightfall. The winter of 1916–17 was even more difficult here than the previous one. Hungry people besieged bakeries for days waiting for the delivery of bread. Those who ran out of money and goods for exchange resorted to begging *en masse*. Hundreds of people were reduced to lying in their houses, swollen with hunger and unable to walk.

Sometimes Germans and Austrians 'paid' for the seized goods and materials, not with money, but with a kind of voucher, which the witnesses described as worthless.[132] There was no uniformity in this respect: roubles and German marks were still used in trade, and sometimes also Austrian crowns. As Germany withdrew roubles from circulation over time, many people who held savings in this currency suffered losses. Moreover, the population's financial resources were drained in a variety of ways. In the vicinity of Prużany, the local commander introduced a 'deposit' of 10 gold roubles for Jews leaving the area; but when the Jews returned from their journeys, the commander did not repay them in coin, but paid its equivalent in Austrian paper crowns, which the local peasants would not accept.[133] Such dishonest actions did not only affect the Jews. The farmers complained to an Austrian officer whom they trusted that they had performed

[129] *Pinkas fun der shtot Pruzhane*, p. 204.
[130] *Drohichyn*, p. 71.
[131] *Telekhaner Yizkor-buch*, p. 18.
[132] *Toizn yor Pinsk*, p. 190.
[133] Mestel, *Milkhome-notitzn*, p. 222.

210 hours of work in the fields administered by the Austrian-Hungarian army, but only 150 hours had been entered in the *corvée* list.

In February 1916, the occupiers issued an order to requisition items made of copper, brass and nickel. They confiscated metal lamps, candlesticks, door handles and more from the houses of prayer. After a few months, they had confiscated all the metal tools from the craftsmen, which was tantamount to depriving them of the possibility of earning any money. As soon as the transmission belts made of leather had been commandeered, the machines that were rendered nonfunctional were sent to the front. In October 1917, supplies of paper, feather and linen were commandeered and later sent to the Reich. In 1918, the Germans carried out further searches of houses, taking the last metal objects for the needs of the arms industry. As a chronicler-witness wrote: "They were robbed systematically and thoroughly – as only the Germans can".[134]

After some time at Prużany, the German occupiers issued coupons for bread, with the daily allowance being only 100 grams per person; later this was raised to 180–200 grams.[135] An inhabitant of Kamieniec Litewski writes that the German authorities introduced strict regulations, and life became extremely difficult. Some of the population even fell into starvation.[136] At the beginning of 1916, the daily food allowance at Pińsk was about 120 g of bread and 500 g of potatoes per person. Then as of mid-February that year, the allocation of potatoes was reduced to 250 g. The monthly allocation of meat per family was 0.5–1 kg. These small allowances let to the development of a black market and a steady rise in prices.[137] In Drohiczyn Poleski, as a witness noted, there were no external supplies of food, and only those who were able to get it from other sources survived.[138] However, when the Germans caught someone trafficking illegally, they charged him with speculation and imposed a fine on him.[139] In the context of Byteń, mention is made of the exceptional zeal of German gendarmes in enforcing the regulations. This account is important because the witness also mentions the nearby town of Kosów

[134] *Toizn yor Pinsk*, p. 194.
[135] *Pinkas fun der shtot Pruzhane*, p. 204.
[136] *Gedenk-bukh fun Kamenets-Litovsk*, p. 435.
[137] *Toizn yor Pinsk*, p. 187.
[138] *Drohichyn*, p. 69.
[139] *Gedenk-bukh fun Kamenets-Litovsk*, p. 448.

Poleski as a place where life was easier, there was more freedom to travel, and the Germans permitted the legal operation of several shops.[140] This suggests that the occupation regime depended in part on the individual approach of the local commandant and his subordinates.

At Pińsk, the Germans' desire to keep control over local trade continued until 1918. Jews were still forbidden to trade door-to-door in rural areas. When in spring, railroad communication with areas previously occupied by Russians was relaunched, the local merchants made attempts to rebuild their former trade contacts there, but the Germans did not allow it. On 21 June 1918, a ban on individual exports and imports of goods was introduced at Pińsk. The hungry fled the city and headed east. They were punished for this, but they still took the risk of crossing the new line separating the territories controlled by the Central Powers and the Russians to find themselves in the areas managed by the Russian Provisional Government.[141] When the Germans found out that they had left the city, they imposed penalties on the refugee's family, one of which, for example, involved confiscating their bread coupons. Jakob Mestel writes that he encountered a situation in which a civilian was punished with eight days of imprisonment and a fine of 100 crowns for arriving half an hour late to work.[142]

Referring to the award of a large part of Polesie to the Ukrainian state under the peace concluded in Brest on 9 February 1918, the Germans announced that from 1 August 1918 they would no longer provide food to civilians, and that the obligation to do so now rested with the government of the Ukrainian People's Republic,[143] although they themselves continued the practice of food confiscation in this area.[144] Requests for help in feeding the civilians of Pińsk which the Citizens' Committee made in August to the URL authorities in Kiev were dismissed there; they responded that Germany still exercised actual control over Pińsk, and moreover, the Ukrainian side was unable to provide food or other goods.

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[140] *Pinkas Byten*, p. 133.

[141] *Toizn yor Pinsk*, p. 196.

[142] Mestel, *Milkhome-notitzn*, p. 215.

[143] The Brest peace treaty of 9 February 1918 defined the northern border of the Ukrainian People's Republic in the area in question as a line running between the villages of Wysokie Litewskie, Kamieniec Litewski, Prużana, and Lake Wygonowskie (*Monitor Polski*, 5 March 1918, no. 15; 18 March 1918, no. 26).

[144] *Toizn yor Pinsk*, p. 197.

The army demanded that the local workforce be used in cleaning, construction, renovation, agricultural and reloading work. This was the case in the vicinity of Prużany and in Janów Poleski.[145] In the latter, Jews worked in the construction of a sawmill, in a fruit drying room and in warehouses. Forced labour was performed either overnight in private homes or away from places of residence. In Byteń, even ten-year-old children were forced to work for the Germans.[146] This was the experience of 11-year-old Dawid German and his peers from Bereza Kartuska, who were used to demolish the church and clean the bricks obtained at the same time.[147] Twelve and thirteen-year-old children were also sent to work at Pińsk.

Women were employed in cleaning work as assistants to cooks, as seamstresses and laundresses. More, girls from Byteń were forced to work in a factory making marmalade from beetroot and swede.[148] Thousands of Jewish girls and women had to work in harvesting and hay-mowing, from where the harvest, after being dried, was immediately sent to German warehouses. Severe penalties were imposed for being one minute late to work. Among other things, miscreants were tied to a post by the commandant's office or to the telegraph poles located opposite the commandant's office. The people punished in this way had cold water poured over them by soldiers. The head of the German police, named Boderski or Boberski, was remembered as the worst of the oppressors in Byteń. He quickly identified the Jewish community and harassed its representatives, walking around the town with a steel baton.[149] He learned Yiddish; 'Jewish militiamen' were placed under his command, and he was responsible for pressing the civilian workers into forced labour.[150]

Severe penalties for not showing up for work were also applied at Pińsk, among other places. Violators were ordered to pay heavy fines or imprisoned. The principle of collective responsibility for acts committed by individuals was introduced. If the designated contingent of forced labourers was not filled, street round-ups were

[145] Mestel, *Milkhome-notitzn*, p. 197; *Yanov al-Yad Pinsk*, pp. 75–76.
[146] *Pinkas Byten*, p. 109.
[147] *Pinkas fun finf kehilot*, p. 379.
[148] *Pinkas Byten*, p. 106.
[149] Ibid., p. 106.
[150] Ibid., p. 119.

carried out on an *ad hoc* basis, and men were also taken out of synagogues, churches and orthodox churches. Several hundred inhabitants of Pińsk were sent to forced labour every day. In December 1916, all men aged 21–45 were summoned to appear, and after a few weeks the same summons were made to girls and childless women aged 16–25. When in February 1917 the temperature sunk to minus 30°C, the civilians refused to work. This resistance was broken by putting eighty men in prison cells in which the temperature was minus 7°C; they were given nothing to eat for the first six days. This group started to work again, but continued to be held in prison overnight.[151]

On the eve of Passover 1917, the Pińsk commandant's office announced that 460 girls and women would be sent to forced labour in the vicinity of Baranowicze. When the designated persons assembled on 30 March, they were disinfected, locked in a Jewish prayer house, and then escorted under guard to the train station. The streets along which the column travelled were closed to outsiders. In order to prevent escapes, members of the families of the deported women were held hostage in the basement of the commandant's office. On 10 April, calls for work were handed out to another 350 girls, but on the day indicated, only about fifty appeared at the assembly point. The outraged Germans organised a raid in the city and even arrested random young women who were not on the list, as the quota had to be filled. Additionally, the city commander ordered the chairman of the Citizens' Committee to do the same. As a form of repression, the curfew was extended (to start at 6 p.m.), and an order to close all bars and restaurants was issued. Despite all these measures, only 150 girls were sent out to join the work party on 21 April.[152] The next group, this time of sixty young women, was dispatched on 10 July. The women were paid only 25 kopecks per working day. In May and June, contingents of 260–500 men were directed to field work, receiving slightly higher pay than the women. An inhabitant of Kamień Koszyrski recalls that the Germans sent many people from her town 'to Poland' (that is the Kingdom of Poland). They left her father and brother, as they were doing various jobs for them on the spot.[153] A resident of Antopol also mentions that young people were sent to labour camps.[154]

[151] *Toizn yor Pinsk*, p. 189.
[152] Ibid., p. 190.
[153] *Yizkor-buch fun der yidisher kehila in Kamin-Koshirski*, p. 638.
[154] *Antopol*, p. 14.

The occupiers established a number of forced labour camps. These operated under very difficult conditions. If the work was carried out far from villages and towns, the workers were quartered in tents or carelessly built barracks. There was no question of an adequate supply of food or work clothes, nor of good hygienic conditions and proper medical care. As a result, after several months of hard physical work of 10–12 hours a day and without the possibility of regenerating their strength, the men and women returned home in a state of extreme physical and mental exhaustion.[155] A resident of Byteń lists three camps for men and one for women, in which his fellow Jews worked under duress, and states that with the help of Jewish workers, the Germans built a system of fortifications on the Shchara River which separated them from the Russian army.[156] The Jews worked together with Russian prisoners of war in at least several places. For example, the POWs mowed meadows from which fodder for horses and cows used by the German army was obtained, but the forcibly employed Jewish girls did the picking and harvesting.[157] Writing about the regime prevailing in forced labour camps, the witness indicates that if anyone came to work five minutes late, they were punished by being tied to the spokes of cartwheels and held in this way for hours.[158]

We have the testimony of one I.L. Abramowicz, who in the winter of 1916 was sent to work in a camp located near the town of Iwacewicze in northern Polesie. He was in a group of fifty Jewish men and women, most of them under 20, who were told that they would work in a marmalade factory for several weeks. The Germans promised to provide good accommodation and food. The Jews did not believe them then, because after several months of the occupation, they knew how civilian workers were treated, being spared no humiliation, beatings or severe punishments, even for minor faults, and sometimes for nothing. As there were rumours of deportation to labour in the Reich, the young labourers feared that they would be taken there too. They were particularly frightened by the stories of how their fellows had been subjected to back-breaking work and appalling treatment

[155] *Drohichyn*, p. 71.
[156] *Pinkas Byten*, p. 110.
[157] Ibid., p. 141.
[158] Ibid., p. 110.

in a camp in East Prussia, where (as people in the district had said) many Jews had died of exhaustion and disease.[159]

However, Abramovich and the remaining 49 young people were brought by convoy to a military base near Iwacewicze, next to the Brest-Moscow railway line, where large supplies of food, ammunition, crude oil, coal and steel were stored. In addition, the Germans established a canned vegetable and fruit factory there, which used local products. Upon arrival, the women were separated from the men; before that, the whole group had been kept under guard in the cold. The men were then taken to a barrack made of long logs, with small openings carved with axes to serve as windows. There was a small stove and a lamp in the centre of the room. The steel chimney leaked smoke and soot. Despite this, people flocked to the stove, trying to keep warm and dry their clothes and shoes. The sleeping places were two-level bunks made of bare boards arranged along the walls. There was no wooden, stone, or brick floor, just trampled earth: it completely melted at the entrance, due to the snow and water carried by the prisoners on their shoes and clothes.

Abramowicz and the remaining Jews were placed in a barrack already occupied by a group of Russian prisoners of war who were also being exploited for forced labour.[160] The area was very crowded. Due to the lack of sanitary facilities, everyone was bothered by lice and cockroaches. It was forbidden to leave the room at night; bodily needs had to be dealt with in barrels placed in the middle of the room. People woke up to work at 5 a.m. The German NCO on duty hit latecomers with a stick. For morning ablutions, wiping the face with snow had to suffice. A piece of bread and a cup of chicory coffee were served for breakfast. The fact that Abramovich and another worker were ordered to unload a coal wagon in two hours says much about the working conditions. Sometimes the workers worked until two in the morning, and as early as 5 a.m. they were woken again for their next tasks.[161] The German soldiers guarding the workers abused them.[162] Military paramedics even sent sick people with fevers of 40 degrees to work. Only those who lost consciousness at the workplace was placed in the infirmary. The Germans treated the Russian

[159] Ibid., p. 118.
[160] Ibid., pp. 121–22.
[161] Ibid., p. 126.
[162] Ibid., p. 124.

prisoners a little better; they identified with their situation in a way, since they could easily find themselves in a similar one. The Jewish women in the camp had better conditions than men; they lived in a well-heated peasant hut and worked in a marmalade factory.[163]

Girls from Byteń were released home from the camp for Passover 1916. Their male colleagues were not sent back with them, but their accommodation conditions improved because they were placed in empty peasants' huts, from where they went to work clearing forests. Abramowicz's father bought him out of the camp; for an amount of several hundred roubles, he was converted into a 'Christian worker'. It can be assumed that the 'convert' received appropriate compensation, and that an appropriate amount also went into the pocket of the German decision-maker.[164] The remaining Jewish boys were only sent home in the late summer of 1916, which means that they had spent over half a year in forced labour. Two eighteen-year-olds died of exhaustion from working in the described conditions; one of the girls developed tuberculosis, and one twenty-year-old committed suicide when he received another summons to appear for forced labour in the autumn of the same year.[165]

It is worth noting that the famine in the towns of Polesie in spring 1916 was the reason why many people applied to work for the Germans, hoping to receive sufficient food in return. This is what five hundred girls from Pińsk did, from where they were transported to a canning factory near Iwacewicze.[166] The families opposed being split up, but the hunger broke their resistance. Some girls were assigned to do housework in the quarters of German officers. The Germans took advantage of this situation, which sometimes resulted in 'intimate relationships'. For the parents, these relationships were a misfortune. Romances with German and Austrian soldiers were so common that chroniclers did not find it necessary to note them down.[167] Due to hunger, refugees camped at Prużany also volunteered for work.[168] They worked in very poor conditions outside the city, fed and paid poorly,

[163] Ibid., pp. 127–29.
[164] Ibid., p. 137.
[165] Ibid., p. 138.
[166] Ibid., pp. 131–32.
[167] *Pinkas fun der shtot Pruzhane*, p. 210; Mestel, *Milkhome-notitzn*, pp. 195, 213, 219.
[168] *Pinkas fun der shtot Pruzhane*, p. 208. It has not been established whether only Jewish people applied for the work.

but for most of them there was no other way to get food. For the same reason, Jews were employed *en masse* by the Germans, in the vicinity of Bereza Kartuska and other places, felling forests on a large scale and in a predatory manner. They also worked there as lumberjacks, carters and porters.[169]

Forced labour was continued until the end of the German occupation. Young Jews were used in the transhipment of goods obtained on the Ukrainian territory which Central Powers troops took after 18 February 1918. They were still punished if they did not show up for work. At Pińsk, the punishment was a ten-day detention in the basement of the commandant's office. In the same year, the case of several hundred girls who had previously been sent to work outside the city and were to return home afterwards became notorious. The commander did not want to allow them to return, justifying his refusal by saying there was not enough food.[170]

In this text, many painful elements of German-Jewish coexistence under the conditions of occupation have been presented. However, at that time some changes that were viewed positively by at least some Jews also took place. This is how they were perceived by those who were in favour of raising the civilian population's status in the public space. As mentioned above, the Germans made it possible for the locals to create representative institutions, which were established to organise social assistance and appoint intermediaries between the occupiers and the general population.[171] By adopting the principle of equal treatment of civilians, the German occupiers created an unprecedented situation in localities dominated by non-agricultural populations. As the majority of these people were Jews, they predominated in the new representative bodies, a change which the general Jewish population welcomed.

Although there were complaints about the harshness of the German administration, the new government was perceived as aiding in the protection of public order. In autumn 1915, for example, the vicinity of Kamieniec Litewski was plagued by groups of demoralised Russian soldiers who had not managed

[169] *Pinkas fun finf kehilot*, pp. 379–80.

[170] *Toizn yor Pinsk*, p. 195.

[171] In Byteń, the local rabbi often pleaded with the commandant to obtain food for poor children (*Pinkas Byten*, pp. 45–46).

to withdraw and remained behind. They obtained food by robbing the local people. The only forces capable of resisting them and breaking them up were the Germans and the soldiers of the Austrian-Hungarian army. Jakob Mestel writes about a similar situation in the context of events near Prużany in the winter of 1915–16. The Russian soldiers' banditry was also ended thanks to a joint pacification action by German and Austro-Hungarian troops.[172] As a consequence, the Jews treated the occupiers as defenders against common bandits, and so they sometimes left their rural farmyards, gathering together for protection in areas where the occupation garrisons were stationed.[173]

An element of the German 'divide and rule' policy in the East was the consent to the development of cultural and educational institutions for the local nationalities, in order to de-Russify them. A resident of Kobryn writes about a great social revival, even of feverish activity by the local Jews under the conditions that the Germans permitted.[174] They agreed to the resumption of the publishing of the Jewish press, the printing of books and the performance of plays in Yiddish. This principle also included the creation of national public schools, and gave rise to the emergence of secular schools with Yiddish and modern Hebrew as languages of instruction. These institutions were financed from the budgets of municipal units where, as far as we know, Jews had a strong representation in the areas in question.[175] One resident of Kamieniec Litewski was pleased to describe how soon after the Germans entered the town, a school was opened in the former post office building where both German and Hebrew were taught. There were lessons in the 'Mosaic religion'; these were traditionally conducted by male teachers (*melamed*s), but women were also employed there as teachers, a complete novelty. This facility functioned until the end of the German occupation. The witness called it a German school, but added that after the departure of the Germans, a secular Jewish school which used its furnishings and supplies was established.[176] We should mention that until August 1915, the Jewish children in this town had not attended the Russian state

[172] Mestel, *Milkhome-notitzn*, pp. 188–89, 211–13.
[173] *Gedenk-bukh fun Kamenets-Litovsk*, pp. 398, 435.
[174] *Kobrin Zamlbukh*, pp. 37, 103, 109.
[175] Kasmach, 'Forgotten occupation', pp. 329–30.
[176] *Gedenk-bukh fun Kamenets-Litovsk*, p. 439.

primary school, and were only educated by private Jewish teachers, and generally only in the field of religion.[177] A Jewish school was opened at Prużany at the end of 1915,[178] where Jewish intellectuals taught.[179] Later, a kindergarten for over one hundred Jewish children aged 4–8 was established. The municipal library was allowed to function, and literary evenings and amateur theatre performances were organised.[180]

The Germans were prompted to consent to the opening of these institutions by a desire to control the children who had previously wandered the streets and the area at large without proper care. That is why they agreed to the Jewish communities' suggestions that Jewish people's schools [*szkoly ludowe*] should be opened.[181] Individual officers of the occupation forces fell in with this general tendency; Lieutenant Jakob Mestel allowed the religious education of Jewish children in his area. He favoured certain cultural initiatives, for example literary evenings with the participation of young people and adults.[182]

The chronicler of the Jewish community in Kobryn points out that the Germans introduced compulsory schooling for all children and, as a consequence, the Jewish young were also sent to public schools.[183] Previously, only wealthy parents could afford to have secular subjects taught to their children. One can imagine the joy with which parents from poorer families accepted the possibility of free education for their children in a public school – something unprecedented before the German occupation.

The occupiers created a new communication infrastructure, expanding the network of narrow-gauge railways and roads. They organised new plants for processing the raw materials obtained locally from forests and agriculture.[184] In some towns, they constructed power plants as well as cinemas.

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[177] Ibid., p. 444.

[178] However, the Jewish 'people's' [*ludowa*] school only operated for two months, because later it had to be used as a night shelter for people who had been displaced by the Germans from their homes, as no alternative accommodation was provided for them.

[179] *Pinkas fun der shtot Pruzhane*, pp. 206–07.

[180] *Rozhina. A yizkor bukh*, p. 204.

[181] *Pinkas fun der shtot Pruzhane*, p. 215.

[182] Mestel, *Milkhome-notitzn*, p. 223.

[183] *Kobrin Zamlbukh*, pp. 19, 117.

[184] *Pinkas fun finf kehilot*, p. 380; *Telekhaner Yizkor-buch*, p. 20.

The Germans also agreed to the distribution of funds and in-kind donations provided by the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee charity. This was only possible until April 1917, however, because at that point the United States joined the *Entente* and was at war with Germany, among others. Money was also flowing in from neutral Sweden, from the Zionist committee in Stockholm, although the Germans confiscated a significant part of the remittances for themselves, including those earmarked for the inhabitants of Prużany.[185] The occupiers allowed German--Jewish social organisations to carry out charity activities in Polesie. Whenever possible, they gave financial support to the Civic Committee at Pińsk, among others. In the first few years, the Germans did not oppose Zionist activity. They allowed the publishing of the Jewish press (the *Pinsker Tsaitung*) or its import from Warsaw (*Haynt*, *Yidish Vort*, *Moment* et al.).

Some changes came after the German offensive of February and March 1918. As the front moved further east and peace treaties were signed with the Ukrainians and the Bolsheviks, personal movement and regional trade intensified, which was boosted by supplies being delivered and people migrating. This was also noted in Janów Poleski and Prużany, which were located further north.[186]

On 9 October 1918, the inhabitants of Pińsk noticed the first signs of a crisis engulfing the German army on the eastern front. On that day, there was a revolt by the crew of an armoured train which had been ordered to move to the western front. Its members did not want to fight anymore. On 20 October, German soldiers demonstrated in the streets of the city. They demanded that the high command start peace talks and bring a quick end to the war. The general staff reacted to these events by strengthening the activities of the counterintelligence services that were seeking the revolts' ringleaders. The German police and counterintelligence were not only checking German soldiers; the local civilians were also subject to increased scrutiny. The freedom to travel and provide information was restricted. In November, information about the revolution in Germany reached Polesie. Under the impression that the Germans would no longer enforce their orders, many Jewish workers did not go to work on the Sabbath. But they had miscalculated, because in response the local commandant directed reinforced

[185] *Pinkas fun der shtot Pruzhane*, p. 213; *Toizn yor Pinsk*, p. 193.
[186] *Yanov al-Yad Pinsk*, p. 76; *Pinkas fun der shtot Pruzhane*, p. 216.

military and police patrols onto the streets, which brought the workers to their workplaces by force. The soldiers only wanted one thing – to get home as soon as possible. From the civilians' point of view, the most important thing was that the change of the system of power should not be accompanied by chaos and violence. Wherever possible, efforts were made to create organisations capable of protecting order and security. The Jews predominated at Prużany, but Poles and Belarusians were also included.[187] The Germans did not interfere with this process. They left the city in December, only keeping control of the nearby railway station (Linowo). While they were leaving, they sold the Temporary City Committee the weapons which the temporary security guards had used. More broadly, in the face of attacks on Jews who lived scattered in the countryside, self-defence groups whose task was to combat banditry were established, mostly made up of former Russian army soldiers. This was the case, for example, at Pińsk and Kamień Koszyrski.[188] The Prużany unit included a group of ten cavalrymen dedicated to quick interventions. The Germans made no attempts to disarm or neutralise them.

On the day when the abdication of Emperor Wilhelm II was announced at Pińsk, the establishment of the Soldiers' Council was proclaimed. Continuous rallies were held by both military and civilians. The scared city commander issued an appeal to the population, urging them to remain calm.[189] The Council of Soldiers' Delegates upheld the rules of the occupation regime, except for a ban on traveling deep into Russia. One of the last gestures of German power was the call by the commandant's office on 24 November to appear for forced labour in the Wołodkowicze forest. They promised a very decent wage, but no one showed up anyway. In December, agreements were concluded to transfer civil authority under the local civic committees to representatives of the Ukrainian People's Republic. The German military guaranteed its autonomy and the right to punish those who opposed it. In January 1919, clashes between the Ukrainian national units and the Bolsheviks took place in Polesie. The first Polish troops appeared on the border between Polesie

[187] *Pinkas fun der shtot Pruzhane*, pp. 217–22.
[188] *Yizkor-buch fun der yidisher kehila in Kamin-Koshirski*, pp. 428–29.
[189] *Toizn yor Pinsk*, p. 198.

and the Nowogródek region.[190] The Germans adopted the attitude of observers. On 22 January, they forced the parties to sign a ceasefire at Pińsk because the fighting threatened the safety of German soldiers.

There was no single date for the withdrawal of German troops from Polesie. They disappeared from Drohiczyn Poleski in November 1918, but only left Pińsk at the turn of February 1919. Their places were taken by Ukrainian, Bolshevik or Polish troops. The Germans themselves withdrew towards East Prussia. The evacuation of the occupation forces from the area in question was orderly. The Germans controlled the communication routes to the end so their soldiers could leave.[191] The last German armoured train left Brest on 9 February 1919.[192] There was not a single report of the departing Central Powers soldiers committing acts of violence against civilians, including Jews.

Reading the memoirs of Polesie Jews leads us to the conclusion that the Germans of the First World War were firm, strict and effective occupiers, under whose rule it was nevertheless still possible to survive. Compared to reports about the other armed formations, the Kaiser's army was described in relatively positive terms. Although it used forced labour, imposed contributions, and regulated economic activity and personal freedoms, it was not recognised as a discriminatory force treating the Jews worse than civilians of other nationalities. This was the personal experience of the first German-Jewish coexistence in the twentieth century, with which the inhabitants of Polesie entered the next German occupation less than a quarter of a century later. In 1941, some of the new regime's elements were familiar, which probably affected how the locals carried out the new German occupiers' orders and their deliberations on the possibility of survival. However, it soon turned out that the attitude of the leaders of the Third Reich towards Jews was very different from that of the representatives of imperial Germany.

[190] *Pinkas fun der shtot Pruzhane*, p. 232.

[191] This was the case, for example, with the Linowo railway station near Pruzhany; see *Pinkas fun der shtot Pruzhane*, p. 216.

[192] Molandowski, *Brześć Podlaski*, p. 94.

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SUMMARY

The article concerns the experiences of the Jewish population under the occupying forces of the Central Powers in western Polesie in the period from August 1915 to the beginning of 1919. It is based on reports published both before 1939 and after 1945. According to the analysis of the source material, Jewish memories of their first contact with the German occupation forces in the twentieth century were ambiguous. Apart from the hardships, changes that were perceived as positive were also remembered.

KEYWORDS

Jews • Polesie • World War I