Neighborly Violence, Social Science, and Superficial Similarities

Jeffrey S. Kopstein and Jason Wittenberg

Jan's T. Gross's pathbreaking book *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne*, inspired a new generation of social scientific research on the Holocaust.[1] It highlighted the importance of local dynamics, the mix of German and non-German perpetrators, antisemitism, avarice, the breakdown of social norms, and pre-existing political divides in facilitating mass violence. Its core argument was that Poles, rather than Germans, were primarily responsible for the violence. But why did the local Poles do it? And how representative was the Jedwabne pogrom? In *Intimate Violence: Anti-Jewish Pogroms on the Eve of the Holocaust* (hereafter *IV*), we sought answers for why pogroms occurred in some localities and not others, focusing on the wave of pogroms that took place in eastern Poland in the aftermath of the June 1941 German invasion of the Soviet Union.[2]

We discovered that pogroms were more likely to occur where Jews and non-Jews were already politically divided and were especially likely where Jews had been mobilized into their own nationalist politics: Zionism. Zionism in the context of prewar Poland meant both a yearning for Palestine and a demand for Jewish national rights within Poland. It is the latter aspect that pitted Zionists against both Polish and Ukrainian nationalists, increasing the probability of Polish and Ukrainian nationalist attacks and decreasing sympathy for Jews among non-nationalist Polish and Ukrainian majorities.

Historians have generally welcomed our approach, though some questioned whether the violence we examined was truly "neighborly," while others were skeptical of our explanation, noting that the sources seldom mention pre-existing political divides. In this brief paper, we respond to both criticisms and draw attention to key methodological challenges in studying micro-level violence, both during the Holocaust and in other contexts. Our aim is not to "defend" our work, but to engage with important questions these critiques raise about how such violence should be understood. Our argument also points to a pressing contemporary issue: the surface-level similarities—and deeper distinctions—between modern forms of anti-Zionism and their historical antecedents. We explore this further in the conclusion.

Pogroms: Neighborly or Not?

Critics of *Neighbors* argued that Gross downplayed the role of German *Einsatzgruppen* and their orders to eliminate Jews and Communists, focusing instead on how they incited local anti-Jewish violence. They also maintained that he gave insufficient attention to the broader role of the Germans in the events at Jedwabne, suggesting that the violence was not primarily driven by

[1] Jan T. Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).
[2] Jeffrey S. Kopstein and Jason Wittenberg, *Intimate Violence: Anti-Jewish Pogroms on the Eve of the Holocaust* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018).

"neighbors" alone. In response—a defense we found mostly persuasive—Gross emphasized the lack of evidence indicating a decisive German role in the massacre.[3]

Localized anti-Jewish violence perpetrated by nonstate actors had occurred previously in the borderlands, and it is therefore unsurprising that survivors frequently employed the term "pogrom" to characterize these events. Nevertheless, the question of whether the violence was primarily carried out by local inhabitants or external agents remains a subject of ongoing scholarly debate. In *IV* we sought to investigate the conditions under which neighbors turned against neighbors, focusing specifically on 219 pogroms (a number we settled on using extant research and our own reading of archives) that occurred in the borderlands during the summer of 1941. Our analysis aimed to identify the distinguishing features of these locales in contrast to the majority of sites where such violence did not take place.

Some readers of our book raised questions about the nature of the pogroms we examined—specifically, whether they were truly spontaneous, locally driven, or intimate in any meaningful way. Was this neighbor-on-neighbor violence? Jean-Philippe Belleau, citing our local- and community-level data, challenged whether we genuinely captured local dynamics. He writes, "Kopstein and Wittenberg's rich and exhaustive book…focuses on the ideological conditions and political processes of pogroms, especially state collapse. In spite of its enticing title, it is about anything but intimacy, the private sphere, or the primary group."[4] Other critics argue that we misidentified the primary perpetrators. John-Paul Himka, for instance, emphasizes the role of nationalist OUN militias—often outsiders to the affected localities—in the Ukrainian regions.[5] Meanwhile, Kai Struve redirects our attention to German involvement, particularly in locations we identified as pogrom sites: Sokal, Tarnopol, Złoczów, Zborów, Jezierna, Grzymałów, and Skałat. "At least here," Struve contends, "the factor of German interference was likely so strong that it far overshadowed all facilitating or inhibiting factors of earlier origin." While acknowledging that Poles and Ukrainians were often present and participated, Struve insists that the dominant influence remained German.[6]

Were these pogroms, then? Pogroms, often perceived as spontaneous acts of violence carried out primarily by enraged local populations, are in fact more complex phenomena. The circumstances under which they occur involve permissive conditions and more direct impetuses. In the case of the summer 1941 pogrom wave the permissive conditions included the preceding almost two years of Soviet occupation, which normalized violence and pitted groups against each other, the collapse of Polish authority in the borderlands after the German invasion, and German encouragement of local populations to conduct "self-cleansing" operations. *IV* does not deny the possible presence of Germans, or for that matter armed outside Polish and/or Ukrainian elements when pogroms occurred. Nor do we deny that these outsiders might have exhorted the locals to attack, stood by while the pogrom unfolded, or even participated in the violence. We recognize

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[3] See the various entries in, Antony Polonsky and Joanna B. Michlic, eds., *The Neighbors Respond: The Controversy over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).
[4] Jean-Philippe Belleau, "'Neighbor' is an Empty Concept: How the Neighborly Turn in Mass Violence Studies Has Overlooked Anthropology and Sociology," *Journal of Genocide Research* 26, no. 1 (2024): 64fn.
[5] John-Paul Himka, *Ukrainian Nationalists and the Holocaust: OUN and UPA's Participation in the Destruction of Ukrainian Jewry 1941-1944* (Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag), p. 207.
[6] Kai Struve, review of Jeffrey S. Kopstein and Jason Wittenberg*, Intimate Violence: Anti-Jewish Pogroms on the Eve of the Holocaust*, H-Soz-Kult, March 21, 2019, https://www.hsozkult.de/index.php/publicationreview/id/reb-27753.

that not all "local" anti-Jewish atrocities are a result of local resentments and conditions. Consider the case of the June 27, 1941, anti-Jewish atrocity in Białystok, where the occupying German soldiers of Battalion 309 relied on the assistance of local Poles to identify Jews. Crucially, it was the *Germans* that rounded Jews up, humiliated them, and then burned them alive in a synagogue.[7] There is also the case of Davyd-Haradok, where the violence seems to have been coproduced by both Germans and locals.[8] We do not consider either of these incidents as pogroms, and are therefore not included in our analysis.

What matters in *IV* is that the locals be the *primary* perpetrators, that is, the ones engaging in the actual violence. *IV* argues that pogroms occur where locals felt the need to "put the Jews in their place" for having the temerity to demand group equality *and*, albeit more implicitly, where potential perpetrators thought they could engage in violence with impunity and without interference from other locals. In places like Jedwabne local hatreds may have been so intense that the German presence alone may have been enough to set off neighbor-on-neighbor violence. In other places there was enough solidarity between Jews and non-Jews that the locals refused to engage in violence.

The pogroms of 1941 encompassed a class of mostly similar events with occasional variation that depended on the social and political context in which they emerged. Thinking of the matter this way may help reconcile the ongoing tension between empirical generalization historical specific in the long-standing scholarly debate about *Neighbors* and scholarship it spawned (including our own).

Explanation: Sources and Methods

Whatever the proper admixture of internal and external causes, the summer of 1941 witnessed a wave of brutal anti-Jewish pogroms across the Eastern Front, carried out not by Nazi death squads alone but also by local non-Jewish populations—particularly Poles and Ukrainians—against their Jewish neighbors.

Other scholars had thematized the pogroms of 1941 before Gross, but *Neighbors* inspired a new generation of social scientists to make sense of them.[9] The prevailing explanations for their occurrence have centered around three commonly cited causes: endemic antisemitism in Eastern European societies; a desire for revenge against alleged Jewish complicity in Soviet crimes during the 1939–1941 occupation; and the opportunistic appropriation of Jewish property.[10]

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[7] According to Zalman Kaleshnik, a survivor of the Białystok ghetto, "It is interesting to note that the cottage next to the Shul, and in which the Polish watchman lived, as not set on fire by the Germans, since they knew that Poles lived there." (AŻIH 301/546). Although one may doubt Kaleshnik's ability to estimate the state of German knowledge, his observation does point to the importance of local Polish assistance in identifying Jews and Jewish property during the Białystok massacre.

[8] Franziska Exeler, "Death and Destruction in Dayvd-Haradok: German Crimes, Local Complicity in the Holocaust, and Survivors' Search for Justice in a Former Polesian Shtetl," *Holocaust Studies* 31, no. 3 (2025): 396-420.

[9] Diana Dumitru and Carter Johnson, "Constructing Interethnic Conflict and Cooperation: Why Some People Harmed Jews and Others Helped Them during the Holocaust in Romania," *World Politics* 63, no. 1 (2011): 1-42; Benjamin Mishkin, "Mass Violence without Mass Politics: Political Culture and the Holocaust in Lithuania," in Jeffrey S. Kopstein, Jelena Subotić, and Susan Welch, eds., *Politics, Violence Memory: The New Social Science of the Holocaust* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2023), pp. 124-138.

[10] Paweł Machcewicz and Krzysztof Persak, eds., *Wokól Jedwabnego* (Warsaw: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2002); Andrzej Żbikowski, *U genezy Jedwabnego: Żydzi na Kresach połnocno-wschodnich II Rzeczypospolitej, wrzesień 1939-lipiec 1941* (Warsaw: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, 2002).

These factors are frequently cited in survivor testimonies and in local records. In *IV,* we maintained these explanations fail to account for the variation in pogrom activity across seemingly similar communities.

We posed a difficult question: why did pogroms occur in some towns but not others, even when antisemitism, resentment over Soviet rule, and material motivations were equally or more pronounced in places that remained peaceful, that is, in places where they could have occurred but did not? An analysis of over 2,000 communities in the *kresy* pointed to a critical but underexamined factor—pre-existing political cleavages in the local community, particularly those shaped by Jewish participation in Zionist politics. Pogroms were more likely to erupt in towns where Jews were politically mobilized, especially when that mobilization placed Jews in visible opposition to local nationalist movements. In these environments, local gentiles perceived Jewish political activity as threatening to their own ethno-nationalist aspirations—hence the invocation of "power threat" theory—creating a volatile social context when German occupation removed the constraints on violence.

This explanation does not seek to blame Jewish communities for the violence they suffered—a criticism leveled by one reviewer—but rather aims to uncover the sociopolitical dynamics that made certain communities more vulnerable than others. The violence of 1941 did not emerge spontaneously or randomly; nor did it require a novel ideological shift. The standard factors highlighted by a long line of scholars (including Gross)—antisemitism, resentment, revenge, greed, outright depravity—were necessary but not sufficient. What tipped the balance was a specific political context that rendered those sentiments actionable, that made the Jews seem unworthy of protection.

Critics of this account raised a methodological objection: political cleavages and perceived threats are not commonly mentioned in survivor testimony or in the perpetrators' own justifications.[11] Instead, sources overwhelmingly cite revenge, resentment, and/or hatred. Nobody said during the pogroms "you can't kill those Jews; they voted for the same political parties we did." Equally, we never found any testimony putting words to the effect into the mouths of Polish or Ukrainian perpetrators "let's humiliate the Jews; they voted for the Zionists!" There is no smoking gun of this sort. It is tempting therefore to dismiss our evidence showing a strong correlation between large Jewish communities that supported Zionist parties and the outbreak of pogroms violence in 1941 as a mere statistical artifact, a correlation without a cause. But this critique misunderstands the nature of the explanation. Social scientists and historians frequently identify causal mechanisms that are not directly articulated by historical actors themselves. People are not always conscious of the structural or political conditions that influence their behavior, especially in moments of acute violence or trauma, and not even in the aftermath. We should not expect structural factors like ethnic demography or voting behavior, as important as they are, to be voiced by the actors in the midst of this world historical tragedy. That's not how people talk.

Moreover, victims of pogroms were unlikely to interpret the violence as a response to their own political activity—however legitimate that activity might have been. Zionist organizing and Jewish cultural autonomy were not acts of aggression; they were efforts at communal survival

[11] See the forum edited by Tomasz Frydel in the *Journal of Genocide Research* 22, no. 2 (2020): 280-315, and reengaged by Polly Zavadivker in H-Net Reviews in Humanities and Social Sciences, https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=54544.

and self-determination. Yet, in a context of ethnic competition and nationalist rivalry, such organizing could be interpreted by some non-Jews as antagonistic or even subversive. This misperception—especially in towns with weak state authority and intensifying ethnic nationalism—may have functioned as a trigger, turning latent antisemitism, greed, resentment, or the desire for revenge into organized murder. The fact that Jews (or Poles or Ukrainians) did not discuss ethnic competition in their accounts of the pogroms in no way disqualifies it as an explanation.

Obviously to point to the characteristics of a targeted group, whether it be group size or their revealed political preferences, as playing a prominent role in attracting violent attacks in no way places responsibility on those attacked for their own suffering. As Donald Horowitz notes in his study of the "deadly ethnic riot" (primarily in Asia), "to identify group characteristics of victims is merely to reaffirm what has been observed repeatedly by students of aggression in general—that the aggressor is curiously dependent on the victim. The source of the target choice is located in their relationship and in the characteristics believed to be displayed by the targets and implicitly compared to those believed to be displayed by the aggressor."[12]

These sorts of criticism may ultimately entail a "levels of analysis" dispute, something that future research should consider more deeply. What separates the account in IV from those based primarily on testimonies is the latter uses testimonies to account for the behavior of individuals. We did not seek to explain the determinants and effects of individual behavior in the pogroms of 1941—the array of motives among perpetrators, for example, was complex and contradictory—but instead focused on differences in outcomes between communities, why some endured pogroms and others did not.

Of course, antipathy towards Jews mattered; it mattered a lot. But the ubiquity of antisemitism complicates its explanatory value. Antisemitism was widespread across the *kresy*, yet pogroms were not. In fact, some of the most antisemitic towns and villages—as measured by support for antisemitic parties and political movements—experienced little local violence against Jews in 1941, while more "moderate" areas exploded in brutality. This observation alone suggests that antisemitism, while a necessary background condition, does not explain the geographic variation in pogrom violence. Nor does the severity of Soviet repression correlate neatly with pogrom incidence—many of the towns that suffered the worst Soviet abuses did not see pogroms, and many that did had not been particularly brutalized.

The upshot is that redirecting our focus to local power-threat threat dynamics—a theory, perhaps tellingly, used primarily in the study of race relations in the United States—fills an important explanatory gap: it identifies the local political ecology as the crucial missing variable. Where Jews were politically organized and integrated into the communal struggle over national identity, they were seen not simply as an ethnic or religious "other," but as political competitors. This rendered them more vulnerable when the constraints on violence were lifted by the chaos of the German invasion and the retreat of the Soviet state.

This argument is not only analytically compelling but ethically necessary. It resists the temptation to reduce historical actors to caricatures of hate or greed or vengeance, and instead locates violence within the broader field of political struggle and state collapse. It also helps to explain why neighbors—people who had coexisted peacefully for decades—could suddenly turn

[12] Donald L. Horowitz, *The Deadly Ethnic Riot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 128.

against one another. The issue was not mere ideology, but the way that political structures, identity formation, and opportunity converged in certain places at a catastrophic moment.

The moral discomfort that some feel toward this explanation stems, perhaps, from its complexity. It does not allow for a simple division of perpetrators and victims along lines of evil and innocence. It recognizes the agency of local actors, even as it uncovers the structural and political contexts that conditioned their choices. To confront this reality is not to absolve anyone, but to understand how communal violence can erupt from within familiar and seemingly stable communities.

Inspired by Gross, we came to a related but not identical conclusion. *Intimate Violence* does not excuse or blame; it explains. It provides a framework for understanding why certain communities descended into pogroms while others did not, despite similar levels of prejudice and grievance. This type of explanation—rooted in political sociology and comparative analysis—offers crucial insights not only into the Holocaust but into the dynamics of mass violence more broadly. Hatred alone is rarely enough; violence requires a context in which it becomes both possible and thinkable. Understanding that context is not only an academic task—it is a moral one.

Zionism

A word on Zionism is in order since it figures so prominently in our thinking about the pogroms of 1941. Prior to the establishment of the State of Israel, Zionism came in two broad and to some extent mutually exclusive varieties. The first and primary one was advocacy for Jewish self-determination in Palestine and efforts to encourage emigration. This was the Zionism of Theodore Herzl and the many thousands of Jews who fled to Palestine in the ensuing decades. The second variety strove for Jewish national rights within Jews' countries of origin. This meant cultural autonomy, control over education, and resistance to assimilation into the host language and culture. This was the Zionism of the "General Zionists", a party that was particularly influential in interwar Poland, and whose advocacy for Jewish national rights is a backdrop to the 1941 pogroms. Jews at that time could subscribe to one, both, or neither of these varieties—for a number of reasons some Jews were not Zionist at all.

One of the more surprising and controversial findings in IV is the robust correlation across hundreds of localities in eastern interwar Poland between having experienced at least one pogrom and electoral support in the 1920's for political parties, in particular the General Zionists and the Bloc of National Minorities, sympathetic to (or at least not hostile to) the Zionist aim of Jewish national revival within Poland.

We argued that the second variety of Zionism, which we labelled "Jewish nationalism," antagonized Poles who sought a culturally and linguistically homogeneous Polish nation-state, and also Ukrainian citizens of Poland, who had nation-state aspirations of their own in areas where they were a majority. Pogroms, we argued, were an attempt to thwart these Jewish national ("Zionist") aspirations. Crucially, we maintain, while antisemitism may have been a necessary condition for a pogrom to occur, it was certainly not sufficient—only about 10% of the localities where Jews and non-Jews cohabitated experienced a pogrom.

The relationship between antisemitism and anti-Zionism is of contemporary relevance, especially in light of Hamas's October 7, 2023, attack on Israel, Israel's subsequent invasion of Gaza and

attack on Iran, and widespread protests against Israel's wartime actions under the guise of "anti-Zionism." One of the key questions that has risen to public consciousness in the context of widespread opposition to Israel's conduct of the Gaza war is the extent to which anti-Zionism, in which such opposition is often couched, can be equated to antisemitism.

On the surface, the answer is clearly no. Jews were divided about Zionism before Israel was established. Some of the most vigorous anti-Zionists at that time were Hasidic Jews, whose primarily political goal was not national rights but ensuring that Jews were free to perform their religious obligations. It could not be the case that the most pious, observant Jews were also antisemitic.

In the case of non-Jews, the logic is slightly different. There were undoubtedly many non-Jews at that time who disliked Jews but who were enthusiastic about Jewish emigration to Palestine, making them antisemitic but Zionist (in the first sense). But many non-Jews would have been anti-Zionist in the second sense by denying the Jews that chose to remain in their country of origin the national rights they sought. Does that also make them antisemitic? Maybe. But in the case of interwar Poland no non-Jewish minority, even the very numerous ethnic Ukrainians, was granted national rights. So, Jews were treated no differently from other national minorities, and the denial of Jewish national rights was therefore not in and of itself antisemitic. Anti-Zionism was not equivalent to antisemitism in that case.

Since the establishment of Israel and up to the present day the waters have become murkier. Israel instantiated Jewish national self-determination. This resolved the pre-Israel struggle for Jewish national rights within their countries of origin because Zionist Jews outside of Israel were and still are free, under the law of return, to emigrate to Israel. The raison d'être of Zionism changed from seeking self-determination to defending Jewish sovereignty in the State of Israel through monopolization of the use of force and encouraging further Jewish immigration to and support of Israel. What is the contemporary relationship between anti-Zionism and antisemitism? More specifically, are the professed anti-Zionist sentiments that exploded in sometimes violent ways across western countries since October 7, 2023, antisemitic? We make two observations.

First, in the aftermath of the Holocaust it became déclassé to be openly antisemitic, at least in Europe and North America, so it became necessary to rephrase such sentiments. The change of rhetoric occurred as early as the 1950s. For example, in Stalin's infamous "Doctors Plot," he felt it necessary to accuse his Jewish doctors of "Zionist" machinations. In 1960s Poland there was a purge of "Zionists," not Jews, from important positions. Rhetorically open antisemitism still carries the taint of the radical right, but anyone not of that persuasion is free to cloak their anti-Jewish animus in anti-Zionist terms. This makes identifying the "sincere" antisemites more difficult.

As an empirical matter the many thousands of protestors worldwide decrying either Israel or Zionism almost certainly span the entire spectrum, from Jews and others who see Zionism as the root cause of Israeli-Arab conflict generally and the devastation in Gaza particularly to "sincere" antisemites who therefore also hate the Jewish state. Obtaining a more precise estimate of the proportion of those holding anti-Zionist/anti-Israel views that also hold anti-Semitic views depends crucially on how each is measured. Whatever one thinks of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of anti-Semitism, which includes some views critical of Israel, it does not serve as an appropriate measure for purposes of distinguishing between the

two. A European study from 2006 that does not suffer from the problems of the IHRA definition found that anti-Semitism does increase with the degree of anti-Israel sentiment. Specifically, the greater the number of anti-Israel sentiments respondents held, the greater the number of anti-Semitic sentiments they also held. 56 percent of respondents at the maximum anti-Israel level held anti-Semitics views.[13] It is a safe assumption that the same survey today would find an even more striking correlation between the two.

Second, while defenders of anti-Zionism point to the many observant Jews in their ranks as proof that anti-Zionism does not equal antisemitism, they also miss a key feature of antisemitic sentiment: the holding of Jews and Israel to a different standard than other national groups and countries. One of the most important intra-Jewish debates about Zionism is the extent to which a Jewish state is inherently exclusionary of non-Jews. Whatever position one takes on this matter, it should be principled and apply to other circumstances. "Anti-Zionists" deny Jewish national self-determination but not that of Iranians or Jordanians. The Iranian constitution discriminates against non-Muslim citizens.[14] The 1954 nationality law in Jordan effectively excluded Jews who held Palestinian nationality before the establishment of Israel from obtaining Jordanian citizenship, a stipulation that has not been formally revoked.[15] "Anti-Zionists" excoriate the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories but not the Turkish puppet state of Northern Cyprus illegally carved out of Cypriot territory or the Moroccan occupation of the Western Sahara. "Anti-Zionists" abhor the lethality of Israel's war against Hamas but not the orders of magnitude more deadly conflicts in Syria and Yemen. "Anti-Zionists" cloak themselves in the rule of law but ignore the 1920 San Remo Resolution, a legally binding instrument that among other things included the desideratum of a Jewish national home in Palestine. Anti-Zionists in interwar Poland were at least consistent. Today's anti-Zionists fail to manage even that, proving that at least some of them are antisemites, whether they realize it or not.

[13] See Edward H. Kaplan and Charles A. Small, "Anti-Israel Sentiment Predicts Anti-Semitism in Europe," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* Vol. 50, Issue 4. Aug 2006, pp. 548-561, especially pp. 553-555; for similar findings among college students, see Rachel Shenhav-Goldberg and Jeffrey S. Kopstein, "Antisemitism on a California Campus: Perceptions and Views Among Students," *Contemporary Jewry*, vol.40, no.2, 2020, pp.237-258.

[14] See https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iran_1989, especially article 20, which acknowledges the rights of all citizens but only to the degree that they conform to Islamic criteria.

[15] See Lilian Frost, "Report on Citizenship Law: Jordan," EUI Global Citizenship Observatory, 2022, p. 13.