Les Damnés de la Terre: The Pogroms of the Russian Civil War (1917-1922)

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INTRODUCTION

Listen up, Chekist!..

Since when

Did you become a foreigner?

I know that you are a Jew

─ Sergei Esenin, Land of Scoundrels

In the post-Cold War period, cultural identity has become an important analytical category in the examination of conflicts, displacing the predominance of ideological cleavages (Huntington 2002). The emergence of ethno-nationalism informed a new criteriology for state-formation and national self-determination (Geertz 2017, 261) which began in the 19th century and culminated in the late 20th century (Huntington 1991). The empirical developments and processes of radical social transformation raised a series of questions pertaining to the role of ethnic identities and minority groups. More specifically, these ascribed differences often translated in power and status asymmetries, as well as increased discrimination (Syed and Juang 2015). In turn, the formation of ethnic cleavages significantly increased the likelihood of political violence, in particular civil wars (Denny and Walter 2014). The combination of intrastate conflict and ethnic discrimination resulted in the systematisation of violence against ethnic minorities in the form of ethnic cleansing. The frequency of to this phenomenon led some to calling it the "metaphor for our time" (Ahmed 1995).

"Our time", or the early post-Cold War period, was characterised by a heightened interest in ethnic conflicts through the lens of modern state building (Bell-Fiakoff 1993; Mearsheimer and van Evera 1996; Posen 1993; Wimmer 1997). In this context, the term ethnic cleansing

appeared in the modern lexicon during the 1980s (Jenne 2010). While ethnic cleansing is not a novel phenomenon (Kiernan 2007), its study from a political science perspective is largely limited to post-Cold War cases (Bergholz 2016; Loyle and Davenport 2020; Weidmann 2011; Yanagizawa-Drott 2014). Meanwhile, pre-Cold War studies focused mostly on the Armenian genocide, the Holocaust, and Communist 'cleansings' (Browning 1992; Goldhagen 1996; Kiernan 2007). However, by doing so, other historical cases have been marginalised by the academic discourse surrounding ethnic conflict studies, undermining the validity of ethnic cleansing theories (Kreuzer 2010) through an omission bias. Hence, developing concepts and arguments almost exclusively on the basis of recent empirical data excludes many, if not the majority, of ethnic cleansings. In turn, this limits our understanding of their dynamics and mechanisms, as there are fewer case studies for theory testing and falsification.

Therefore, in order to improve our current apprehension of ethnic cleansing in the context of civil wars, it is imperative to turn to lesser known cases, such as the Pogroms of the Russian Civil War (1917-1922). What makes this example both an analytic challenge and a fascinating case is the ambiguous position of the Jewish minority vis à vis the armed groups of the Russian Civil War. More specifically the political allegiance of Russian Jewry was not clear cut along warring factions. This prompted virtually all parties of the conflict, even those fighting each other, to perceive Jews as the enemy and target them. Given its complex dynamics, this case constitutes an arguably adequate test for contemporary understandings of ethnic cleansing mechanisms. Therefore, the focus of this paper is on the inner mechanisms leading the main armed groups of the Russian Civil War to committing ethnic cleansing. In other words, *focusing on the Russian Civil War, what are the mechanisms leading to ethnic cleansing?*

The main motivation of this question lies in the value that can be added by historical examples to scholarship on ethnic violence, as the patterns this paper explores go further back in time than the current academic focus. In other words, historical insight is particularly important given that there are certain recurring patterns that we can learn from, especially in relation to enemy perception and ethnic violence.

Given the research question, the causes of ethnic cleansing will be analysed primarily from within the war. Pre-war conditions, will assume a secondary position, supplementing the analysis when necessary. While these can have an impact on mobilisation and fractionalisation during wars (Fotini 2012), they are subordinate to the radical change in social relations occurring *during* wars. Therefore, the above-mentioned question will be answered by first defining the main terms, i.e., ethnic groups and ethnic cleansing, as well as highlighting processes of enemy construction. Subsequently, this paper will present and assess the main literature on the causes of ethnic cleansing as well as its relation to civil wars. Based on this, the emotion-driven mechanisms of resentment, fear, hatred, and rage identified by Petersen (2002) will form the theoretical backbone of the process tracing analysis, which will study the Pogroms of the Russian Civil War. Finally, the results derived from it, show that all four mechanisms are to be found amongst the motivations of the pogroms, albeit to different degrees.

LITERATURE REVIEW

I. Defining ethnic groups

Literature on ethnic cleansing has oftentimes as its point of departure ethnic conflicts (Denny and Walter 2014; Horowitz 1985). At the most elemental level, ethnicity can be conceived on the basis of a culture (Geertz 1973; Horowitz 1985) that includes the creation of collective

meaning through myths, histories, and symbols (Nagel 1994). In this way, ethnic groups can be constructed based on the context in which they operate: either as reaction to unfavourable structures (Gellner 1994), or as a rallying point used by political elites (Brubaker 2004). On top of this, ethnic groups can be identified based on: (i) a biological lineage; (ii) common core values; (iii) the possibility to act as a sphere of communication and social interaction; and (iv) self-identified and externally identifiable membership based on group commonalities (Barth 1969). These insights, taken together, constitute a sufficient definition of ethnic groups.

II. Ethnic groups and Feindbilder

However, what factors cause ethnic groups to become inimical to each other? In multi-ethnic environments, collective identities are constituted in relation to differences and power relations among the various groups, according to a *Us* vs. *Them* dynamic (Wirth-Koliba 2016). Within such a binary, the enemy position can be of two types: (i) *real*; and (ii) *objective* or *absolute* (Arendt 2017; Schmitt 2008). While the first position is characterised by open and external attacks, the latter does not depend on one's own actions (Flickinger 2000), but rather by the function assigned to them within the political system (Arendt 2017). Therefore, *objective* enemies are harder to identify, and, by virtue of their political nature, seen to represent a morally unacceptable social position (Flickinger 2000). Thus the *Feindbild* (or enemy images) results in a collage of all of the negative characteristics and associations an individual, a group, or a state attribute to their enemies (Flickinger 2000). Simultaneously, by doing so, groups define themselves through a negation of the *Other*, crystallising their irreconcilable relative positions (Connolly 1991).

Based on these mechanisms, the *absolute* enemy becomes a profound threat to the group's identity. This is a crucial and uncompromising element, as threats to one's identity (or elements associated with it) are seen as existential threats (Bar-Tal 2007; Kelman 1987, 354-355). Responding to such grave threats requires extraordinary measures, which border illegality. However, the identification of the enemy with the amoral and criminal legitimises its persecution as well as total elimination (Schmitt 2008, 12).

III. Defining ethnic cleansing

Among strategies of discrimination and persecution, ethnic cleansing and genocide are the most extreme and violent ones. *Ethnic cleansing* as an expression emerged in the 1980s (Jenne 2010, 112), and refers to the "expulsion of an 'undesirable' population from a given territory due to religious or ethnic discrimination, political, strategic, or ideological considerations, or a combination of these" (Bell-Fialkoff 1993, 110). In particular, ethnic cleansing is defined by its target (the ethnic group), the perpetrator (a state or an armed organisation able to exercise power over a territory), and the methods used to carry out violence (Bulutgil 2015, 578-579). The latter are carried with the explicit goal of targeting an ethnic minority and permanently altering its situation, and can consist of deportations and mass killings (Bulutgil 2016, 6), as well as mass rapes and forced impregnation (Jenne 2010; MacKinnon 2007, 145). Furthermore, ethnic cleansing as a phenomenon is conceptually separated "from instances of mass killings and/or civilian victimisation, which are typically defined by the absolute number of victims" (Bulutgil 2015, 578) insofar as ethnic cleansing 'policies' target groups based on their ethnicity. And while ethnic cleansing can coincide with both genocide and population transfers, these are distinct acts of violence, with different underlying policy goals as well as different ethical and legal standings under international law (Jenne 2010).

Moreover, ethnic cleansing is most commonly found in civil wars (Denny and Walters 2014). This is the case because ethnic rivalries are more likely to be incited by domestic instability (Fearon and Laitin 2004; Fotini 2012), a factor commonly associated with civil wars. However, scholarship on ethnic cleansing arguably abstracts this phenomenon from the context of conflicts, focusing instead on the homogenising tendencies of modern states (Wimmer 1997), or on specific historical conditions (Kaufman 2001; Mann 2004). This omission, in turn, weakens the explanatory power of theories addressing the causes of ethnic cleansing.

IV. Ethnic cleansing and civil wars

Within the broad academic field of ethnic violence, threat perception is often an integral part of the theories outlining the mechanisms and causes of ethnic cleansing in civil wars. These can be divided in two major categories: one focusing on background conditions, and one on war environments. The reason behind the prominence of threat perception lies in its potential instrumentalization through propaganda, in order to rally popular support against a defined enemy (Eicher et al. 2013). Enemy perception is often closely linked to values, national images (Kaufman 2001), and their projection towards the international system (Eicher et al. 2013). Therefore, this highly contextual phenomenon is often studied through cases of particular conflicts or armed groups (De Nardi 2015; Dodge, 2012; Harb and Leenders, 2008).

Among the two main strands of literature mentioned above, the first one, studying pre-war conditions, can be branched into: (i) those emphasising international factors such as human rights norms and state legitimacy (Ther 2014); (ii) those examining domestic conditions such

as socio-economic cleavages (Bulutgil 2016); and (iii) those studying foundational state-narratives reflecting socio-political conditions (Bulutgil 2016, 2018; Straus 2015). However, these theories do not clarify sufficiently how ethnic groups come to be depicted as undesirable by the broader public and how perceptions vary in multifront civil wars. While historical rivalries and pre-war conditions are a fundamental part of any explanations of ethnic cleansings, they overlook in-war conditions as well as the influence of conflicts on inter-ethnic relations. By doing so, agency of the different ethnic groups is precluded through a historical determinism, and a large part of what leads to ethnic cleansing is lost.

The second strand, focusing on war environments, can be divided into two sub-fields. In the first among these, wars are considered to be "strategic environments" (Bulutgil 2015, 2018), and thus it predicts that ethnic groups will be targeted when: (i) they are standing in the way of the territorial objectives of a state (Downes 2006, 2012; Mylonas 2013; Valentino 2004; Valentino et al. 2004); (ii) resources run low in multifront wars (Straus 2006); (iii) they are ethnically related with an enemy state; or (iv) they rebel or collaborate militarily with an enemy state (Downes 2012; Valentino 2004, 69;). Given these reasons, ethnic cleansing becomes a tactical and/or strategic course of action towards victory (Bulutgil 2015, 581). According to these theories, ethnic cleansing is strictly and temporarily confined to wars, and thus has no repercussion on post-war policies (Bulutgil 2015, 581). However, this conception of ethnic cleansing as occurring in a vacuum does not reflect empirical reality. In fact, often pre-war inter-ethnic conditions are crucial in determining the strategic goals of states or armed groups, as well as their support bases (Petersen 2001). This strand can be said to only offer monocausal explanations for ethnic cleansings during civil war, thus disregarding both pre-conflict relations and immaterial factors such as prejudices. Moreover, given its embeddedness in rational-choice modelling, this subcategory assumes that the preferences of

(military) actors are stable and transitive. Therefore, these theories are limited by their assumption of human rationality, and do not consider the role of historical grievances, social perceptions, and changing desires when explaining ethnic cleansings.

The second theoretical sub-field, while focusing primarily on war environments, also allows for a consideration of inter-ethnic pre-war relations. This perspective assumes wars to be "transformative environments" (Bulutgil 2015, 2018), i.e., "social phenomena that can shape relations between ethnic groups as well as the state leader's perception of what constitutes a security threat" (Bulutgil 2018, 1139). According to this strand, ethnic cleansing occurs based on two mechanisms: retribution and pessimism (ibid). More specifically, ethnic cleansing takes place when the resentment caused by a reversal of political hierarchies among groups, or a perception of it, causes ethnic groups to seek revenge once the military situations changes (Bulutgil 2016, 2018; Balcells 2010; Midlarsky, 2005, 2011; Petersen 2002). In addition, ethnic cleansing can also emerge from a pessimistic evaluation of minority ethnic groups as a security threat. The change in the perception of dominant groups on possible peacetime collaboration is heavily influenced by war-time experiences (Bulutgil 2015, 582). Therefore, if for instance, an ethnic group collaborates with the enemy, it will not only be perceived as a security threat during the war, but also after its conclusion (Bulutgil 2018, 1139).

These theories assume a retrospective rather than anticipatory logic (Bulutgil 2015, 582), thus being more suitable for analyses distant in time and space from the events studied, rather than providing a strong predictive function. By doing so, however, they manage to incorporate notes from other scholarly perspectives, namely threat perception and strategic considerations, and, to a lesser extent, pre-war inter-ethnic relations. Therefore, this strand

can be said to provide more complete explanations for the casual logic of ethnic cleansing compared to the others (Bulutgil 2015, 588).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Given the focus of this thesis on civil war *en plein*, its theoretical framework will primarily be informed by theories on the proximate causes of ethnic cleansing, and as such it will expand on the perspective of wars as *transformative experiences* applied to armed groups. Among the theories related to it, one in particular stands out, i.e., Petersen's (2002) emotion-driven approach. This work represents the new 'emotional turn' within the discipline of political and security studies (Crawford 2000; Elster 1996), directly challenging the rationalist-material simplification of political behaviour (Hutchison 2018). By looking at instances of ethnic cleansing in Eastern Europe throughout the 20th century, Petersen (2002) identifies four emotion-based mechanisms, "facilitating individual action to satisfy an identified desire/concern" (19).

I. Resentment

The first mechanism is predicated upon the emotion of resentment, namely the perception of ethnic status reversal (Petersen 2002). This feeling is grounded in a deep sense of injustice, and can be seen as a desire to put the *Other* "back in their place" (Petersen 2002, 110) This logic appears in the context of structural changes, i.e., the disintegration or weakening of central state apparatuses whereby ethnic hierarchies change. This reversal occurs through an alteration of sovereignty relations, the composure of political and policing organs, language, and citizenship policies (Petersen 2002, 51). Therefore, the target of ethnic cleansing will be the minority perceived to occupy unjustly the highest socio-political status. Resentment is alimented by considerations of one's group status, group comparisons, and related

hierarchies. In order to have a positive conception of one's group, other minorities must be seen negatively (van der Dennen 1987), hence the motivation to act violently stems from day-to-day minor humiliations (Petersen 2002, 51).

II. Fear

The second mechanism is fear, and is found in situations of "anarchy or emerging anarchy" (Petersen 2002, 68), in which the target of ethnic cleansing is the group posing the main threat to the perpetrator. Hence, fear accentuates the desire for security, and can easily be manipulated by elites to achieve their own goals (Petersen 2002, 74). In a mechanism similar to the *security dilemma* theory, the fear-driven logic posits that a threat does exist, being embodied by a rival ethnic group, and thus it rests on "observable structural property" (Petersen 2002, 75). Fear can be said to mainly drive the behaviour of the masses by instilling in them the worry of displacement or extermination (Taylor 1998, 19). According to this logic, the perception of threat becomes the main cause of ethnic cleansing (Posen 1993), and offence becomes the predilected defence strategy.

III. Hatred

Hatred, on the other hand, is a cultural schema, containing the negative representation of the features of other ethnic groups. Ethnic hatred is thus a type of constructed *ancient hatred*, an antagonism against a minority which may always lurk in the background but is only seldom activated (Petersen 2002, 63). The activation of hatred occurs likewise when central state structures collapse, and the opportunity for violence arises. Given its capacity to reason with emerging unstable situations, hatred can be used as an instrumental factor by elites towards the attainment of particular goals. Furthermore, this emotion becomes essential in justifying

ethnic conflict, as it essentialises and illegitimates the *Other*, thus clearing the path for an *immoral* or exceptional course of action against other groups.

IV. Rage

The last mechanism is *rage*, and it offers an alternative, non-instrumental explanation for ethnic cleansing. Compared to the previous emotions, *rage* does not follow the direct path linking beliefs and emotions with material and structural factors. Specifically, rage is said to arise from diffuse or unconscious sources rather than specific structural factors (Petersen 2002, 76).

Rage can appear in contexts of extreme suffering and societal stresses, where "wars, occupations, hungers, political upheavals, [and] economic depression" (ibid) set the stage for ethnic violence as a catalyser of feeling of despair and frustration. This phenomenon is also known as *cumulative ethnic aggression*, defined as a culmination of grievances in the form of violence directed at a representative or substitute of the main but inaccessible group (Horowitz 1973). Therefore, while rage can be closely associated with hatred, as well as the meaning attributed to the aggression. The main identifier of rage are the cognitive distortions in the selection of a target, and of the subsequent support such a logic gains (Petersen 2002, 84).

All of the mechanisms outlined above constitute plausible factors leading to the pogroms of the Russian Civil War. Therefore, all four processes are expected to be observed in the analysis of the chosen case, although with different recurrence rates.

METHODOLOGY

This paper will to assess to the presence of resentment, hatred, fear, and rage among the motives of ethnic cleansing through process tracing. This method allows for "strong within-case inferences" (Beach and Pedersen 2013, 163) drawn from in-depth case study on the Pogroms in the Russian Civil War through personal diaries of combatants, prose, newspaper articles, official government reports, and secondary historical scholarship. Focusing on the pogroms occurring from 1917 to 1922, the material analysed will presumably reveal the processes instigating ethnic violence against Jews at the level of armed groups, as well as testing the reconstructive potential of Petersen's (2002) theory. Furthermore, given historic policies confining Jews to the Western regions of the Empire[1], the geospatial focus will be on communities of nowadays Belorussia, Ukraine, Moldova, Lithuania, and eastern Poland.

However, due to the dating of the event and later politicisation of the Civil War by Soviet authorities, personal accounts of armed group members involved in ethnic cleansing are not easily available. Most of the accessible literature on the subject concerns the White and Red Armies, while treating the other armed groups as mere epiphenomena. Moreover, the history of the pogroms and of the Civil War continues to be a contested and highly politicised subject. Hence, the different sources used by contemporary Russian and Western scholars portray varied pictures of the events. This is because the sources might have been sought to confirm one's own narratives, which in turn is indicative of a selection bias in the academic literature surrounding this event. In order to overcome this potential issue, this paper will consider a wide range of scholarship representing contending causes and explanations (Bennet and Checkel 2014, 25).

[1] An example is the *Pale of Settlement*, enacted in 1971, which limited the territories in which Jews could live and practice their profession (Gitelman 2001,)

I. Operationalisation

Of the four emotion-driven mechanisms theorised by Petersen (2002), violence motivated by *resentment* is expected to be witnessed when dominant ethnic groups experience *unjustly* perceived status reversals and when the collapse of legal constraints makes violence feasible (Petersen 2002, 53). Violence of this type is usually directed towards the most central symbols of a group (Petersen 2002, 111), be it embodied by people or objects. Although similar to resentment, *hatred* "rests upon old images being accepted over and over" (Petersen 2002, 93). Thus aggression is expected to be unleashed upon a long-hated ethnic group, following familiar motivations and methods of violence (Petersen 2002, 64). Thus, if the ethnic group becomes a target only recently, or if the justification for violence is novel, then this particular emotion-driven logic does not hold.

On the other hand, the mechanism of *fear* is grounded in tangible or real threats to one's security (Petersen 2002, 74), and it predicts that ethnic cleansing will occur as a preventive measure against a potential danger, along the lines of an offensive defence. Finally, *rage* stems from a general anxiety, and as such it does necessarily relate to the targeted ethnic group. The uncontrolled explosion of emotions arising from desperation and frustration is directed towards a target in the proximity, without apparent motives or specific patterns, but as a way to vent discontent.

II. Case selection

Among the competing theories on ethnic cleansing during civil wars briefly outlined above, many draw on post-Cold War cases. Although there a few studies considering earlier instances of ethnic cleansing, these mostly focus on inter-state wars such as World War II.

Therefore, pre-World War II ethnic cleansing examples are largely absent from the scholarly literature. One in particular has rarely figured beyond few regional-historical analyses: the Pogroms of the Russian Civil War (1917-1922), called by some the "forgotten genocide" (Bemporad, 2019, 161) due to their marginalised role in history. Pogroms, an originally Russian phenomenon[2], are generally understood as a "cross between a popular riot and a military atrocity, where an unarmed civilian, often urban, population is attacked by either an army unit or peasants from surrounding villages, or a combination of the two" (Abramson 1999, 109).

This case fits the aforementioned definition of ethnic cleansing, as the Jewish communities were targeted by Russian troops with the goal of extermination. These pogroms were the first example of modern ethnic cleansing of its kind, being carried in a systematic and militarised fashion by the different armed groups. However, this event has been insufficiently addressed by previous political science scholarship, partly because of its complexity, and partly because it was overshadowed by the Holocaust (Budnitskii 2001, 751). In this context, the study of the Russian Civil War (1917-1922) is a 'novel' case against which to Petersen's (2002) emotion-driven approach.

The Russian Civil War was a multifront which marked the complete dissolution of the Russian empire. While the starting and ending dates of the Russian Civil War are subject of debate, this work will assume the October Revolution (1917) as its starting point, because of the explicit refusal of Bolsheviks to communicate and compromise with other groups, as well as the crystallisation of the different parties. While by mid-1921 the Bolsheviks forces were appearing as the undisputed winners of this conflict, the White army, i.e., their major

[2] *Pogrom* "derives from the Russian verb *gromit'* (to thunder, smash, or break)" (Kopstein 2021, 216)

opponent, only disbanded in late 1922. Therefore, 1922 will be considered as the year in which the war came to an end, also considering the continuous antisemitic violence committed by the remnants of the White Army up until that point.

Within this framework, a defining aspect of the Civil War was the ethnic violence towards the large Jewish community of the Russian Empire, living primarily in its Western regions. At the time of the war, antisemitism was a prominent ideological aspect of imperial policies, as Jews had consistently been seen as emboding the malaises of the Russian empire. In fact, since the time of Catherine the Great (1729-1796), they were persecuted, repressed, or at times converted (Stanislawski 1983, 103). Pogroms assumed their characteristic form in late 19th century, most notably after the death of Tsar Alexander II (Gitelman 1988, 5). Thus, while these were not unprecedented events at the time of the Civil War, the conflict intensified and transformed the violence against Jews, especially due to the weakening of central political authority.

More precisely, anti-Jewish violence reached a peak during the Civil War: more than 2,000 pogroms took place, of which 1,200 in Ukraine during the years 1918-1919 (Gitelman 1988, 25). While it is difficult to indicate an exact number of casualties, most scholars agree that between 50,000 to 100,000 lives were lost in this conflict (McGeever 2019, 2), while some speculate as many as 200,000 deaths (Veidlinger 2013, 37). The novelty of these pogroms consisted primarily in the militarised and systematic fashion through which armed groups conducted ethnic cleansing (Bemporad 2019, 19). According to a classic study, 40 percent of Jewish deaths were caused by the Ukrainian Nationalist forces headed by Semen Petliura, while the White Army, and especially the troops under Gen. Denikin, were responsible for 17.2 percent of casualties (Gergel 1951, in McGeever 2019, 2). The Red Army, on the other

hand, was responsible for 8.6 percent of pogrom deaths, while the remaining ones were attributed to the guerrilla forces of the Green Armies, Cossacks, and Polish troops (ibid).

In all of this, Jews themselves did not constitute an active or unitary front during the Civil War. However, they were the least adverse to the Bolsheviks (or the Red Army), who had among their highest ranks Jews such as Trotsky or Zinovyev. The Red Army was initially lacking the necessary command and control structures to face its enemies, and thus remained disorganised until the reforms introduced by Trotsky took place (Smele 2015, 81). Subsequently the control of the Army was in the hands of a few generals and Trotsky himself. The major enemy of the Reds was the White Army, a movement composed by Imperial military officials who sought to reinstate the Tsar. Because of their experience during the Great War, they were the most organised and disciplined group, at least in the first years of the war. At times, the White Army would form alliances with the Ukrainian Nationalists, who fought for national independence, and with the Cossacks, local Ukrainian warlords. On top of these, Polish forces were fighting for national independence from the Russian Empire, and as such were antagonised by both Reds and Whites, who sought to preserve the territories of the Empire. Finally, a minor but energetic armed group was the Green Army, composed by peasants defending their lands, thus dissociating themselves "from the ideology of the other combatants" (Bemporad 2019, 5).

ANALYSIS

In analysing the factors leading armed groups to ethnic cleansing during the Russian Civil War (1917-1922), this section will follow the four emotion-driven mechanisms introduced by Petersen (2002) in light of historical events. By doing so, the context of the particular cases will first be introduced, followed by a discussion of the actions taken by the relevant armed

groups. Subsequently, an alternative explanation will be brought forward, leading to a concluding discussion of the findings.

I. Resenting the extension of rights

The antisemitism endemic in Imperial Russia often translated to antisemitic policies, limiting the movements, professions, and educational opportunities of the Jewish population (Pinkus 1988, 24-27). However, after the February Revolution of 1917, most legal restrictions on Jews were lifted. More concretely, Jews were allowed to participle in public life, run for elections, apply freely to schools and universities without being numerically restricted by quotas, enter previously barred professions, serving in the higher Command of the Army, as well as live beyond the designated territories (Pinkus 1988, 64). It is therefore not surprising that the Jewish populace took advantage of their new rights which were imprinted in the Constitutions of the first Soviet Republics, and by doing so, occupied a more prominent role in the public sphere. In fact, Zionist felt free to celebrate their election to the new Provisional Government publicly, parading in non-Jewish neighbourhoods as well (Gitelman 1988, 94). At the same time, Hebrew as well as Yiddish cultural production flourished (Gitelman 1988, 90), and between 1918 and 1920, the numbers of Jewish members of the Communist Party increasing exponentially (Pinkus 1988, 77).

Moreover, in 1918 Yiddish became one of the official administrative languages in Ukraine and Belorussia (Pinkus 1988, 93), and by 1920, six of the twenty-one members of the Central Committee[3] of the Communist Party were Jews (78). The political overrepresentation can be attributed to the eagerness of Jews to finally take the stage and partake in political power, thus making their presence felt after centuries of restrictions. This sudden appearance led the

[3] The executive branch of the Communist Party.

populace to generally resent their new status and claim that foreigners were ruling the country (Budnitskii 2005, 60). In fact, non-Jews perceived these events as a "challenge to [the] ethnic power structure" (Kopstein 2021, 218), and thus the lowering of legal constraints on Jews was experienced by them as a status reversal.

In particular, the old images of Jews as poor, oppressed, isolated, and indifferent to Russian affairs were contrasting with newer ones of Jews living among gentiles, legislating over them, and publicly celebrating their political victories. In addition to this, the Bolsheviks were also pushing for anti-antisemitic propaganda, claiming that counter-revolutionary forces were by definition antisemitic (Budnitskii 2005, 130). This was done because Jews constituted a valuable societal group for the Bolsheviks, who sought to replace the Intelligentsia loyal to the Tsar. However, this act further cemented the belief in Bolshevism or Communism as a Jewish conspiracy, both among 'counter-revolutionary forces', i.e., Whites, Ukrainian Nationalists, and Poles, and among the masses of peasants and workers (Budnitskii 2005, 83).

The extension of rights was welcomed by some Jews, while others, specifically those with Zionist or more Orthodox views[4], were wholly indifferent to the new political situation. However, the breakdown of the rule of law in the contested Western regions emboldened the White and Polish Armies, as well as Cossacks, to routinely loot, kill, rape, and rase to the ground the countless shtetelekh[5] on their way (Bemporad 2019, 6). On the contrary, military leaders of the different groups, would commonly use the expression "Jew-Bolshevik" (Abramson 1999, 112), or see Bolshevism as giving "Jews lordship over our peasants and

[4] Understood here as deeply religious Jews, tied primarily to their communities.
[5] Yiddish term designating towns with a predominantly Jewish population.

workers" (112). Despite ethnic cleansing not being commanded by the political or military leaders of the Ukrainian Nationalists or the Whites, the endemic antisemitism which figured in 'motivational' speeches meant that there would be no punishment for those committing pogroms (Gilley 2019, 117).

Likewise, antisemitism was lurking among the Red troops, who felt that their countries were being taken over by foreigners and capitalists (Abramson 1999, 112). In particular, Red soldiers were hostile to fellow Jewish comrades, claiming they did not "want anything to do with Jews" (Babel 2002, 425). This professed distance, however, was minimise when they would enter Jewish towns and kill the inhabitants, often after the Poles and Cossacks passed through them first (Babel 2002, 458-459).

Therefore, it could be argued that the social status and rights gained by the Jews after the February Revolution heightened feeling of *resentment* among virtually all armed groups: the Whites and Ukrainian Nationalists believed that Jews were occupying positions of power, previously held by Tsarist loyalists, only thanks to their alliance with the Bolsheviks. Some Reds, on the other hand, felt that their own party was being overruled by Jews. The collapse of the central government and the general anarchy ensuing from the Civil War presented these groups with the opportunity to put the Jews "back into their place". This is even more the case since many of the pogroms committed especially by the Whites were focused on violence against Jews and destruction of synagogues, and not on the looting of their property (Bemporad 2019, 29). However, in other instances, ethnic cleansing was combined with looting. This was particularly the case when ethnic Ukrainians, Russians, and Poles felt entitled to their *rightful* wealth and status which was stripped away by Jews.

II. Fearing the autonomy of Jewish communities

As mentioned in the previous section, Jewish communities were perceived by other ethnicities as closed-off from the rest of society, being largely disinterested in Russian or local politics. In addition, the linguistic barrier posed by the traditionally religious Hebrew and Yiddish education received by young Jews meant that many were not entirely familiar with Russian culture or language (Pinkus 1988, 35). Because of this, Jews were more inclined to adhere and support Jewish parties such as the Poalei-Zion or the Bund. The former was centred on the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine, while the latter was politically closer to the Mensheviks. In this context, the comparatively few Jews who joined the Bolsheviks were largely secularised individuals and well-assimilated into Russian culture (Pinkus 1988, 78), at times even opposed to Zionism and Judaism. Hence, the fact that many Jews did not fall under the sway of Bolshevism represented a threat to the Communist Party.

More specifically, after the October Revolution, the Bolsheviks were intent on solving the so-called 'question of nationalities', or the subdivision of the territories of the former Russian Empire into Soviet National Republics. However, Jews did not initially fit the criteria necessary to obtain their own territories, despite living in very close-off and independent communities. These, in turn, proved difficult to monitor by the Soviet government. In addition, after the October Revolution, the Zionist movement was revamped by the Balfour Declaration of 1917, a British public statement supporting Jewish settlement in Palestine. Moreover, the humanitarian and financial aid Jews received from foreign Jewish organisations (Gitelman 1988, 122-123) raised suspicions among Soviet officials. Thus, Jews were perceived as a threat to Soviet affairs since they might have been seen as a fifth column, which may have represented a potential internal threat to the consolidation of the Soviet regime.

Similarly, for the Ukrainian Nationalists, the relative isolation of Jews from political affairs constituted an obstacle towards the creation of an independent nation-state. As proclaimed by the leader of the Ukrainian Nationalist in a 1919 speech:

> "Know that you are a people unloved by all, and you create such discord among people, as if you do not want to live, as if you are unconcerned for your nation. So long as nobody touches you, sit quietly, unhappy nation that troubles poor people" (Petliura, in Gilley 2017, 46).

Moreover, from the perspective of the White Army, Jews were both Bolshevik and German spies (Budnitskii 2005, 100). The latter belief, in particular, was a remnant of the Great War in which many of the White officers fought. Therefore, Jews were considered to be foreign agents living in the territories under the control of the Whites, thus posing a strategic threat towards their advancement.

Given the above, it could be argued that Bolsheviks, Ukrainian Nationalists, and to a lesser extent the White Army, were motivated by strategic considerations to commit ethnic violence against Jews. In other words, the different armed groups active during the Russian Civil War *feared* Jews because of the difficulty to monitor them. This, together with the threat that Jews might have been loyal or more connected to foreign countries such as the UK posed a security hazard. Therefore, armed groups may have sought to destroy Jewish communities in order to prevent them from joining or aiding enemy forces, and subsequently shift the balance of power in their favour. These actions and justifications, taken together, would correspond to the emotion-driven mechanism of fear.

III. Ancient hatred(s)

While the different structural changes occurring during the Russian Civil War radicalised antisemitic action, this discrimination was already embedded in the Russian context at least since the 17th century. In fact pogroms, by definition, have been a typically Russian form of ethnic cleansing, constituting extremely violent riots which would usually target the Jews of a city as well as their property. The frequency of pogroms increased since the assassination attempt of Tsar Alexander II (Kopstein 2021, 216), who was erroneously thought to have been killed by Jews. In the context of the Russian Empire, pogroms would most commonly occur in the wake of inexplicable or extraordinarily violent crimes, which would then be attributed to Jews. In these regions, pogroms would regularly involve "rituals of humiliation, rape, torture, and the forced violation of victims' sacred norms and space" (Kopstein 2021, 217). As in the case of Isaac Babel's 'stream of consciousness' description of the Zhitomir pogrom of June 1920:

> "The Poles entered town for three days, Jewish pogroms, *cut off beards, they always do*, rounded up forty-five Jews in the market, took them to the slaughterhouse, torture, they cut out tongues, […] those who tried to save them were machine-gunned down, they butchered a janitor into whose arms a mother had thrown an infant out of a burning window" (Babel 2002, 380 - added emphasis)

Antisemitism, thus, constituted a form of ancient hatred. And specifically in the Russian context, this hatred was rationalised and attributed to religious differences. A traditional Christian belief saw the Jews as *deicides*, or collectively responsible for the death of Jesus Christ (Bemporad 2019, 9). This image, together with those depicting Jews as usurers and sinners, fed into the animosity against Jews throughout centuries. Similarly, Semites had always figured as perpetrators rather than victims in Christian imagery, plotting for the

destabilisation of domestic order through 'secret organisations'[6]. Because of this, it is unsurprising that these recurrent notions were used as propaganda, to further entrench and antagonise Russian Jews. For instance, a 1919 White Army pamphlet referred to the Bolsheviks, and in particular Trotsky (a Jew), as having "crucified Russia like the Jews crucified Christ" (in Silano 2022, 19). Moreover, during the Orthodox Council of 1917 a priest, echoing the prevalent Russian public opinion of the time, claimed:

> "Jews, who own the contemporary press in the form of the leading newspapers throughout the world, seize onto every act of 'violence' against Jews … saying that they are persecuted. […] [They] always use these pogroms for their own benefit" (Ponomarev, in Silano 2022, 15).

In fact, pogroms were supported by many Orthodox clergymen, who saw the Russian Civil War as a *holy war* through which the godless Jews and Bolsheviks who usurped power in Russia could be defeated (Gitelman 1988, 99). It is important to note the historic pre-eminence of the Orthodox Church as the main authority among rural Russians and Ukrainians, which was in many cases instrumental in governing every aspect of one's life, from birth to death, as well as opinions (Silano 2022, 12).

Hence, the deep-seated role of antisemitism in the Russian empire, and specifically among Christian subjects, was rendered explicit through recurrent pogroms. In this context the ethnic cleansing occurring during the Russian Civil War was perpetrated according to immemorial motivations and methods. The "historical roles of enmity" (Petersen 2002, 112) characteristic of the hatred-driven mechanisms are well explicit during these pogroms, especially in the images of Jews as manipulative and godless conspirators.

[6] For instance by being linked to the Protocols of the Elders of Zion (Bemporad 2019, 9)

IV. Peasant rage

As indicated above, the perception of Jews by the majority of the Russian population was tinted in a history of antisemitism. Hence, in the occasion of sudden changes or violent events, Jews would routinely be used a scapegoat as well as a relief valve for grievances and anxiety. Such was the case in relation to the internecine war time policy of *War Communism*, initiated in 1918, which brough about widespread poverty and famine. The core aspects of this tactic were "nationalisation of industry, labour conscription, militarisation of labour, [and] grain requisitioning" (Engelstein 2019, 590) and thereby mobilise workers against peasants. These measures resulted in decline in industrial and agricultural production, as well as widespread poverty both in villages and cities, which would not have regular supplies of food (Smele 2015, 180-181).

In the industrial centres of Moscow and Petrograd, open antisemitic violence among workers coincided with the enactment of War Communism (McGeever 2019, 38), while peasants (organised as guerrilla forces under the banner of the Green Army) were acting on the popular sentiment to "slaughter the Yids" (McGeever 2019, 42). As it is often the case with the mechanism of rage, antisemitism appeared as a "substitute for leadership" (Petersen 2002, 98) at a time when territories would routinely fall into the hands of different armed groups. At the same time, this violence was unprecedented, as in many of the Jewish communities engulfed by it were previously in good terms with their non-Jewish neighbours (Bemporad 2019, 19). Thus, acting on existing structures of antisemitism, workers and peasants may have started attacking Jews and destroying their property in order to vent their discontent. Hence, the "uncontrolled mayhem of the pogroms [appeared as an opportunity] through which one could «steal from the rich, […] drink one's fill of vodka, […] savour the wild pleasures of rape and murder»" (Abramson 1999, 113).

V. Alternative explanations

Beyond the framework of emotion-driven mechanisms, the main alternative explanation of what lead the armed groups of the Russian Civil War to commit ethnic cleansing may be opportunism underpinned by socio-economic inequalities. In other words, the conflict might have been seen as an opportunity for soldiers to acquire wealth and status. In fact, it was only from 1861 that serfdom was abolished in Russia, and the profound inequality of Russian Society still affected people at the time of Civil War (Lindert and Nafziger 2014). In this context, Jews might have become the main victims because of the lack of prosecution and accountability following the pogroms. Therefore, attacking Jews and their property, especially during the War, had rarely any consequences.

However, this would have only been possible due to the endemic antisemitism so deeply entrenched in Russian territories. The choice of Jews rather than other ethnicities as victims was presumably justified through at least one of the emotion-driven mechanisms described above. Moreover, it is only through this kind of rationalisation, rather than mere opportunism, that anti-Jewish ethnic violence reached the magnitude of the Civil War pogroms.

VI. Discussion

Based on the events discussed above, it is important to note that it is rare for a single mechanism to lead to ethnic cleansing. On the contrary, given the nature of these processes, they are often complementary to each other. Specifically, resentment, fear, and rage are all plausible explanations of how the different armed groups became perpetrators of anti-Jewish violence, yet by themselves they do not depict a complete picture of the events. This is because the element of hatred, which is based on prejudices embedded in the history of

Russo-Jewish relations, structured the way through which violence was manifested. In other words, the mechanisms leading to ethnic cleansing based on resentment, fear, and rage would generally occur along older ritualised forms of violence, and would be justified using the same antisemitic subject positions. The ritualistic methods according to which violence was conducted consisted in attacking the most prominent symbols of Jewish communities, such as Synagogues or Rabbis (Gitelman 1988, 105), and publicly humiliate Jewish norms, as for instance the cutting of locks and beards. The only novelty of the Russian Civil War consisted in the militarisation of pogroms, and the systematic fashion in which the different armed groups conducted those (Bemporad 2019, 9). Notwithstanding, widespread antisemitism was the canvas on which all of these events took place, as well as the reason why pogroms would rarely be opposed or posthumously investigated, with the Bolsheviks being an exception (Budnitskii 2005, 152).

A notable finding is the different levels, organisational or individual, at which antisemitism was present in the various armed groups. Specifically, the White Army, lacking a unifying ideology, adopted antisemitism as the central tenet of its Weltanschauung (Budnitskii 2005, 127). Yet when analysing the war memoirs of two of the most famous White generals, namely Wrangel and Denikin, to whom the majority of the pogroms were attributed (Gitelman 1988, 97), I found no trace of antisemitic attitudes. Arguably, this was done in order to not ruin their reputation in Western European political circles (Smele 2015, 162). Therefore, the White Army, based on the actions of its main exponents, was consciously grounded in staunch antisemitism.

Similarly, the Ukrainian Nationalist Forces were highly fragmented, partly because of their dependence on local warlords (i.e., Cossacks). Antisemitism would have thus been

instrumental in creating the cohesion necessary to face other armed groups. Moreover, given their often-changing alliances and the multifractality of the Russian Civil War, identifying Jews as the main enemy, or the paradigmatic *Other*, might have allowed for the indispensable stability in keeping their troops spirited.

Antisemitism, however, was not part of the Bolshevik 'creed'. In fact, Bolsheviks sought to uproot this type of racism, since the support of the Jewish populace seemed to be considered invaluable for their power consolidation. Yet, it proved difficult to eradicate anti-Jewish prejudices among their troops at an individual level. This is perhaps the reason why one still witnessed pogroms carried by the Red Army later followed by official prosecutions. Likewise, antisemitism animated the single members of the Green Army, whose only aim was to defend their property from the Soviet state, rather than deliberately annihilate the Jewish population.

Finally, the pogroms of the Russian Civil War appear to have been started by a popular revolt against Jews. Specifically, the earliest instances of anti-Jewish violence during the Russian Civil War were recorded in major industrial cities (Budnitskii 2005, 56). Only later was this violence sustained by the different armed groups, which contributed to a rise in frequency and savagery of the pogroms. This finding contrasts other historical cases of ethnic cleansing such as those in Rwanda and Yugoslavia, which were initiated by armed groups and only subsequently included to the broader population (Lemarchand 2009; Mueller 2000).

CONCLUSION

The Russian Civil War was a multidimensional conflict, in which different groups contented simultaneously for the control of the former Russian Empire and for national independence.

In all of this, Jews, traditionally organised in communities relatively isolated from central political affairs, were attacked by all warring parties, albeit to different degrees. To answer the initial question, i.e., *which mechanisms led to ethnic cleansing in the Russian Civil War?*, the pogroms were motivated by four main processes: resentment, fear, hatred, and rage. Resentment was primarily due to the rights granted to the Jewish population by the newly installed Bolshevik government. In this case, the pogroms were a way to 'put Jews back in their place'. Fear, on the other hand, arose from the security dilemma posed by Jewish communities, specifically by their relative disinterest in national affairs and by their ties with Jews around the world. The third mechanisms, hatred, was fed by the historical antagonism between Russians and Jews, and manifested itself in the recurrent methods of violence and motivations of the pogroms. Finally, rage was also one of the factors leading to the pogroms, as a violent and irrational reaction to the suffering caused by the Civil War and Bolshevik labour policies.

While some of these mechanisms are more explicit that others, in the majority of cases they operated synchronously, thus complementing each other. At the same time, the motivations leading to specific mechanisms varied depending on the armed groups. Thus, one limitation of this thesis is its general overview of armed group. However, this was done because of the difficulty in retrieving adequate and sufficient sources for each warring party. Furthermore, a more minutious research on the topic is beyond the scope of this thesis.

Another limitation lies in the mechanisms themselves, which emphasise individual motivations rather than group ones (Petersen 2002, 3). Yet these emotion-driven processes can still be analysed at a collective level, if one assumes group preferences to be an aggregation of individual ones. In fact, in at least two cases, the pogroms did not reflect the

policies of armed groups, but rather the widespread antisemitic beliefs among their members, from soldiers to generals (Gilley 2019, 116-117).

Moreover, the antisemitic component of the case chosen might result in a potential disadvantage. In fact, anti-Jewish violence is largely studied as a separate type of ethnic cleansing, specifically after the Second World War and under the label of *Holocaust studies*. This is done because of the exceptionality attributed to antisemitism, given its recurrence throughout history and world regions. However, it is still valuable to study antisemitic ethnic cleansing on par with others, since, as showed in this thesis, the basic elements of ethnic violence coincide. In addition, the different insights gathered through the analysis of varied ethnic cleansings can inform one another, and thus contribute to a better understanding of the phenomenon.

To this purpose, the present study of the pogroms of the Russian Civil War (1917-1922) revealed a major difference between this case and the most famous post-World War II ones. The discrepancy in question lies in their different initiation: while in Russia they were initiated by popular animosity, in more recent examples they would usually begin with a few individuals unrepresentative of their broader communities, as in the Bosnian case (Wimmer 1997, 638-639). Despite this finding, a more detailed research is required in order to emphasise the motivations particular to each armed group of the Russian Civil War. Only through this type of analysis can the specific motivations behind pogroms be understood in their entirety. Additionally, more research is needed in the minor organisations fighting during the Civil War, such as the Green Army or the Ukrainian Nationalists, and their relation to the Jewish population.

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