

Complicit Testimonies in the Australian Investigative Archive

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Abstract: A Special Investigations Unit (SIU) in Australia was established in 1987 to find evidence of war crimes as defined in the recently amended *War Crimes Act*, and to prosecute perpetrators of war crimes committed during the Second World War. These alleged war criminals were predominantly former Central and Eastern European displaced persons (DPs) who had arrived in Australia in the post-war period, many of them complicit in the Holocaust. This late attempt at prosecution occurred in the context of similar moves towards punitive justice in the other main countries of resettlement: the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. Focusing on the language used by suspects in the interviews that the Special Investigations Unit conducted, this article reads the interviews as an empirical repository of alleged perpetrator testimony that speaks to non-German complicity with the German-led Holocaust.

Keywords: displaced persons, testimony, complicity, Holocaust, investigations

And what's that, what happened?

Let them inside.

And tell me what you want and I'll tell you whatever.

You don't need that, on tape record. Oh anyway, go on. I don't give you any answer to you.

Til you contact my lawyers.¹

The late twentieth century saw a resumption of interest in locating, investigating and prosecuting alleged war criminals who had resettled in the West in the post-war period. The main countries of resettlement – the United States, Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom – all instituted judicial processes to be able to either denaturalise and deport or criminally charge war criminals, particularly those complicit in the Holocaust. In Australia,

This article was supported by a grant from the Australian Research Council: 'Russian Immigrants and Anti-Communism in Cold War Australia, 1946-1966' (DP220102526).

1 National Archives of Australia (NAA), A9525, Attorney General's Department, Special Investigations Unit [hereafter, A9525], PU690, Interview with Andrey M., 17 December 1992.



this late burst of official activity resulted in investigations into around 800 individuals, most of whom had been part of the million non-Jewish Central and Eastern European displaced persons resettled by the United Nation's International Refugee Organisation (IRO) between 1947 and 1952. While the judicial process was ultimately unsuccessful in securing any convictions, the investigative files are a unique historical resource. The Special Investigations Unit files held at the National Archives of Australia are, to date, the only fully accessible archive in the West that contains evidence of the delayed transnational effort to prosecute 'immigrant perpetrators'.² This archive is also a vast empirical repository of testimony that speaks to non-German complicity with the German-led Holocaust.

Displaced Persons

The Holocaust, although established and led by the Germans, relied on the 'complicity and cooperation' of non-Germans, particularly in the East.³ These Central and Eastern European perpetrators were involved in a vast and multifaceted collusive structure which began with individual and/or paramilitary group acts of murder or organising local pogroms immediately prior to and/or beside German occupation. There was then an increasing involvement with the progressively institutionalised German machinery. Individuals volunteered or were conscripted from local populations or from Soviet prisoner of war camps into auxiliary police (*Schutzmannschaft*) battalions assisting the four *Einsatzgruppen* (mobile killing units) sent into Soviet territory, and also into regular army units, and *Waffen-SS* units, including the infamous *Trawniki*

2 Claire E. Aubin, 'From Treblinka to Trenton: Holocaust Perpetrators as Immigrants to the Post-War United States' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2022), p. 3. Following Raul Hilberg, the word 'perpetrator' is here used to describe individuals who 'played a specific role in the formulation or implementation of anti-Jewish measures' and is used interchangeably with 'war criminal'. These labels, of course, hardly ever remain uncontested. Raul Hilberg, *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders: The Jewish Catastrophe 1933-45* (New York: Aaron Asher Books, 1992), p. ix; Alette Smeulers, Barbora Holá and Maartje Weerdesteijn, 'Introduction', in *Perpetrators of International Crimes: Theories, Methods, and Evidence*, ed. by Alette Smeulers, Maartje Weerdesteijn and Barbora Holá (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 3.

3 Jan T. Gross, 'Themes for a Social History of War Experience and Collaboration', in *The Politics of Retribution in Europe: World War II and Its Aftermath*, ed. by István Deák, Jan T. Gross and Tony Judt (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 31, fn. 48. For a full discussion of DP perpetration and post-war security screening, see Jayne Persian, *Fascists in Exile: Post-War Displaced Persons in Australia* (London: Routledge, 2024), pp. 9-50.

guards used in *Einsatz Reinhard* (Operation Reinhard: the extermination of Polish Jews).⁴ Independent armies as well as various paramilitary and irregular organisations all colluded with the Germans. After the *Einsatzgruppen* had moved through, German authorities relied on local and auxiliary policemen to assist in combatting ‘partisans’.⁵

All perpetrators were complicit in the outcome – the (transnational) Holocaust under German occupation – but most non-Germans were what we might term morally ambiguous low-agency, or tactical agency, perpetrators: the ‘trigger-pullers’.⁶ Acts of genocide occurred amidst a ‘very complex reality’, in the context of anti-Soviet nationalisms throughout Eastern Europe.⁷ To some extent, collaboration was *realpolitik*: only Germany offered nationalists the means to strike (back) at the Soviet Union. Franz Stahlecker, commander of *Einsatzgruppen* A, for example, admitted that ‘when assigning Lithuanian and Latvian personnel for the Execution commandos, particular attention was paid to choosing men whose family or relatives had been murdered or carried off by the Russians’.⁸ With regard to captured Red Army prisoners of war who became German-led perpetrators, historian Seth Bernstein argues that the line between volunteering and coerced recruitment can be difficult to discern.⁹ In various places, mass violence was an outcome of regional interethnic conflicts.¹⁰ In others, the Germans relied on the

4 It has been estimated that up to 10% of the 7.8 million troops wearing German uniforms were not German. It should be noted, however, that the *Waffen-SS* usually fought as regular troops and towards the end of the war, were conscripted. George Ginsburgs, ‘The Soviet Union and the Problem of Refugees and Displaced Persons, 1917–1956’, *The American Journal of International Law*, 51.2 (1957), 356; David Cesarani, *Justice Delayed: How Britain Became a Refuge for Nazi War Criminals* (London: Phoenix Press, 2001 [1992]), p. 35; Sir Thomas Hetherington and William Chalmers, *War Crimes: Report of the War Crimes Inquiry* (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1989), p. 40.

5 NAA, A9525, PU74 Part 1, ‘Re Fricsons’, Transcription of meeting held with Professor Richard Breitman, 24 May 1989.

6 Eli M. Rosenbaum, ‘An Introduction to the Work of the Office of Special Investigations’, *United States Attorneys’ Bulletin*, 54.1 (2006), 1. See also Timothy Williams, ‘Agency, Responsibility, and Culpability: The Complexity of Roles and Self-Representations of Perpetrators’, *Journal of Perpetrator Research*, 2.1 (2018), 57.

7 Gross, p. 31.

8 Cited in ‘*The Good Old Days: The Holocaust as Seen by its Perpetrators and Bystanders*, ed. by Ernst Klee, Willi Dressen and Volker Riess (New York: Konecky & Konecky, 1991), pp. 24–27.

9 Seth Bernstein, *Return to the Motherland: Displaced Soviets in WWII and the Cold War* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2023), p. 62.

10 See Omer Bartov, *Anatomy of a Genocide: The Life and Death of a Town Called Buczacz* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018); Mark Mazower, *Hitler’s Empire: Nazi Rule in Occupied Europe* (London: Penguin Books, 2009).

dramatically increasing numbers of local forces to 'do the dirty work of the Holocaust'.¹¹

These variations of motivation and agency were later viewed sympathetically by the western Allies, who were left with the task of organising the mass of people remaining in Germany, Austria and Italy at the end of the war, including perpetrators who had fled west with the retreating German Army.¹² An increasing distrust of the Soviet Union - largely due to the German-Soviet joint invasion of Poland in 1939, Red Army atrocities and post-war deportations - came to influence the way in which its former Allies treated non-German collaborators.¹³ For political as well as pragmatic reasons, Germans and Austrians were the main priority.

Many displaced persons successfully joined the collective of victims, arguing that they had been caught 'between national socialism and Soviet communism'.¹⁴ Instead of collaborators and perpetrators, then, the argument went that these groups should be seen as morally ambiguous, if not as homegrown anti-communist resistance movements.¹⁵ As for complicity in the Holocaust, there had been 'no other choice'.¹⁶ Louise Holborn, the official historian of the International Refugee Organisation, noted that 'as the Cold War developed there was a growing appreciation of the fact that many persons might technically have collaborated with the Germans and yet were in refugee status' as they were unwilling to return to the Soviet Union.¹⁷ DPs of various backgrounds were thus resettled in the West: 415,000 to the United States, 170,000 to Australia, 157,000 to Canada, and 80,000 to the United Kingdom.

11 Wendy Lower, *Nazi Empire-Building and the Holocaust in Ukraine* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), pp. 131, 135; Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (Eastford: Martino Fine Books, 2019 [1961]), p. 205; SS-Obersturmführer August Häfner, cited in "The Good Old Days", p. 153.

12 For example, approximately 160,000 Latvians, 80,000 Estonians, and 64,000 Lithuanians fled west. David Nasaw, *The Last Million: Europe's Displaced Persons from World War to Cold War* (New York: Penguin Press, 2020), p. 46.

13 Francine Hirsch, *Soviet Judgment at Nuremberg: A New History of the International Military Tribunal after World War II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 7-53.

14 Anna Holian, *Between National Socialism and Soviet Communism: Displaced Persons in Post-war Germany* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011).

15 See Jayne Persian, 'Russians, Ukrainians and the Anti-Bolshevik Bloc of Nations', in *Russians in Cold War Australia*, ed. by Phillip Deery and Sheila Fitzpatrick (London: Lexington Books, 2024), pp. 205-26.

16 Benjamin Tromly, *Cold War Exiles and the CIA: Plotting to Free Russia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 82.

17 Louise W. Holborn, *The International Refugee Organisation: A Specialised Agency of the United Nations: Its History and Work, 1946-1952* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 192.

By the 1970s and 1980s, though, western governmental attitudes towards harbouring alleged perpetrators, what Eric Lichtblau has termed the phenomenon of the 'Nazis next door', was slowly changing.¹⁸ Scholars have attributed this change to factors including the Eichmann trial and the airing of the fictional television series *Holocaust*, as well as to the devalorisation of the victims of communism in a thawing Cold War.¹⁹ All four major countries of resettlement instituted inquiries.²⁰ The first judicial process was established by the United States in 1979, resulting in the denaturalisation and deportation of more than one hundred people, including at least two who had resettled in the United States via Australia.²¹ In Australia, an official inquiry was carried out in 1986, headed by a former deputy secretary in the Attorney-General's Department, Andrew Menzies.²² After a wide-ranging investigation, Menzies found that '*it was more likely than not* that a significant number of persons who committed serious war crimes' during the Second World War had entered Australia as displaced persons. He proposed amending the *War Crimes Act* to enable the prosecution of alleged perpetrators but pragmatically advised that only 'really serious war crimes' should be pursued.²³

Australia was to provide defendants with a 'fair trial with all the safeguards for accused persons in trials in those courts, having particular regard to matters such as the gravity of the allegations and

18 Eric Lichtblau, *The Nazis Next Door: How America Became a Safe Haven for Hitler's Men* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014).

19 Donald Bloxham and Jonathan Waterlow, 'War Crimes Trials', in *The Cambridge History of the Second World War, Part I: Ideologies*, ed. by Richard Bosworth and Joseph Maiolo (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 205; Richards Plavnieks, *Nazi Collaborators on Trial During the Cold War: Victors Arājs and the Latvian Auxiliary Security Police* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 11, 226; Claus-Christian W. Szejnmann, 'Perpetrators of the Holocaust: A Historiography', in *Ordinary People as Mass Murderers: Perpetrators in Comparative Perspectives*, ed. by Olaf Jensen and Claus-Christian W. Szejnmann (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 25-54 (p. 34).

20 See Judy Feigin, *The Office of Special Investigations: Striving for Accountability in the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (US Department of Justice: 2006); Alti Rodal, *Nazi War Criminals in Canada: The Historical and Policy Setting from the 1940s to the Present* (Ottawa: 1986); Hetherington and Chalmers, n.p.

21 United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 'Office of Special Investigations', *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, <<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/office-of-special-investigations>> [accessed 1 June 2023]; Aubin, p. 128.

22 Eli M. Rosenbaum, 'The Investigation and Prosecution of Suspected Nazi War Criminals: A Comparative Overview', *Patterns of Prejudice*, 21.2 (1987), 21. For an overview of the Australian war crimes investigations, see Persian, pp. 134-68.

23 A.C. Menzies, *Review of Material relating to the Entry of Suspected War Criminals into Australia* (Canberra: The Review, 1986), pp. 12, 21, 125. Emphasis added.

the lapse of time since the alleged crimes'.²⁴ Prosecution evidence, for crimes that occurred over forty-five years earlier, was required to include documentary and, ideally, eyewitness evidence to the alleged *individual* perpetrator carrying out a war crime. It was an incredibly frustrating task for the Special Investigations Unit charged with the task. Consultant historian Richard Breitman noted at one point that 'as [SIU historian] Konrad [Kwiet] says rather frequently these days, there are certain crimes that by their very nature are not documented and so when you talk about evidence you are only talking about witness testimony. That is all you have got'.²⁵ Mobile killing units, for example, 'came, shot and left'.²⁶ There was very little 'concrete, direct proof'.²⁷

While investigators thus had a very high evidentiary threshold to breach, the alleged perpetrators were of course concerned to exculpate themselves from a potentially dangerous situation.²⁸ Mark A. Drumbl has memorably described these opposite tensions of the prosecution and defence – or the investigator and interviewee – as 'the hydraulics of criminal law'.²⁹ This article follows recent scholars in arguing that rather than simply aiming to use this testimony to assign guilt or to verify historical events, a close examination can reveal complex insights into the 'internal truth' of individual perpetrator behaviour and psychological mechanisms of guilt, responsibility or denial.³⁰ In other words, as Erin McGlothlin has asked, how do perpetrators 'relate intellectually and emotionally to their own histories of violence?'³¹ A

24 War Crimes Amendment Act 1988 No. 3, 1989 – Sect 3, Substitution of Preamble, <http://www9.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/viewdoc/au/legis/cth/num_act/wcaal1988201/s3.html> [accessed 1 June 2023].

25 NAA, A9525, PU74 Part 1, 'Re Fricsons', transcription of meeting held with Professor Richard Breitman, 24 May 1989.

26 SLNSW, Series 5: Mark Aarons – Interview & Translation Tapes, MLOH 626 [hereafter, Mark Aarons Tapes], Konrad Kwiet, interviewed by Mark Aarons, 19 November 2000.

27 NAA, A9525, PU152, Konrad Kwiet, file note, undated; Konrad Kwiet, 'A Historian's View: The War Crimes Debate Down Under', *Dapim: Studies on the Holocaust*, 24.1 (2010), 319–39.

28 See Christopher Browning, *Collected Memories: Holocaust History and Postwar Testimony* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), p. 5; Sibylle Schmidt, 'Perpetrators' Knowledge: What and How Can We Learn from Perpetrator Testimony', *Journal of Perpetrator Research*, 1.1 (2017), 85–104.

29 Mark A. Drumbl, 'When Perpetrators Become Defendants and then Convicts', in *The Routledge International Handbook of Perpetrator Studies*, ed. by Susanne C. Knittel and Zachary J. Goldberg (London: Routledge, 2020), pp. 120–29 (p. 120).

30 For an overview of recent scholarship, see Ute Hirsekorn and Sue Vice, 'Perpetrator Testimony', in *The Palgrave Handbook of Testimony and Culture*, ed. by Sara Jones and Roger Woods (London: Palgrave, 2023), pp. 567–95; Schmidt, p. 98.

31 Cited in *The Palgrave Handbook of Testimony and Culture*, p. 568.

close reading of these testimonies provides evidence of complicity with the German-led Holocaust, and follows the earlier lines of justification provided by advocates of the 'furtive people' hidden among the mass displaced persons cohort.³²

The Special Investigations Unit

The Special Investigations Unit was led in the first instance by Robert Greenwood QC and then by Graham Blewitt, with a peak staff of up to fifty-two investigators and historians. The Menzies Review provided the names of 193 individuals who were potential candidates for investigation. Further lists of names were provided by interested parties, including the Chief Prosecutor of the USSR and the Wiesenthal Centre in Jerusalem. The main nationalities investigated were: 238 Lithuanians, 111 Latvians, eighty-four Ukrainians, forty-five Hungarians and forty-four Croatians.³³ Large groups of individuals investigated included alleged former members of the 12th Lithuanian Police Battalion and the Kupiškis Execution Squad, the Latvian Arājs Kommando, the Belgrade Special Police, and the Turets Police.

Many of the 800 files contain only scraps of biographical information culled from the various lists provided to the Special Investigations Unit from third parties; some of this information was decades old. A total of 248 individuals were 'not [now] located in Australia'. Meanwhile, 262 individuals had either died or were thought 'probably deceased' due to their age. cursory investigations often discounted suspects because the birth date or place of birth stated on migration documents did not match up to details in the allegation. Janis L., for instance, allegedly a leading member of the security police (*Sicherheitspolizei*, SiPo) in Kraslava, Latvia, later admitted that he had changed his name in the immediate post-war period because his wartime actions were 'nothing to brag about'.³⁴ Rather

32 John Dos Passos cited in Atina Grossman, *Jews, Germans, and Allies: Close Encounters in Occupied Germany* (Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 26.

33 In addition: forty-one Belarusians, thirty-five Germans, thirty Russians, eighteen Serbians, seventeen Dutch, fourteen Estonians, nine Poles, five Austrians, four Czechs, three Slovaks and three 'Yugoslavs', two Bosnians and two Romanians, and one Australian, one Bulgarian, one Greek, one Montenegrin, one Norwegian and one Slovenian. This list is indicative rather than comprehensive as there are sixty-seven files for which I have not yet been able to access the claimed nationality.

34 Attorney-General's Department, Special Investigations Unit, *Report of the Investigations of War Criminals in Australia* (Canberra: Australian Gov. Pub. Service, 1994), pp. 48, 88, 204, 286.

than necessarily expressing any sense of remorse, this was a statement of fact: while the western authorities may not have been actively hunting non-German perpetrators, it would have been unwise to be completely truthful.

Some allegations were such that, even if proved, they either did not amount to a war crime under the Act or were not viewed as worthy of prosecution under the Act. Wartime collaboration with the German authorities was not a crime under the Act. Other morally dubious acts such as giving up hidden Jews or assisting Jews for financial reward were also not deemed crimes under the Act. While involvement in forced deportations *would* amount to an offence under the Act, the Director of Public Prosecutions took the view that any such charges 'would not be of such a serious nature to justify a prosecution'.³⁵

If an allegation seemed worthy of further investigation, the suspect was unobtrusively observed in order to validate the identification and the suspect's fitness for interview. Unless suspects were charged with a crime, the interviews themselves were a fairly informal process – no caution or evidence was provided – and relied on a cooperative interviewee. Initial contact usually involved two investigators knocking on the door, introducing themselves and asking if the householder was the person they were looking for.³⁶ Suspects could simply refuse to answer the door; others replied: 'no comment, no comment'.³⁷ One Ukrainian man was vigorously defended by his wife, who refused to let him speak. The investigators noted that his innocence was thus accepted by them 'at face value although perhaps reluctantly'.³⁸

Interviews were carried out by criminal investigators, not historians. These investigators could only speak English and so many transcripts are difficult to understand, with the interviewee answering in halting English; interpreters were called in only rarely.³⁹ The investigators also had very limited historical knowledge of the period and were easily bamboozled by geographical and political descriptors; interviewees merely reiterating the same nonsensical false histories they had

35 It should be noted here that the Commonwealth Government also paid the costs of defence in the *Commonwealth v Polyukhovich* trial. Attorney-General's Department, *Report of the Investigations of War Criminals in Australia*, pp. 357, 409, 520, 525; David Bevan, *A Case to Answer: The Story of Australia's First European War Crimes Prosecution* (Kent Town: Wakefield Press, 1994).

36 143 individuals were approached in this way.

37 See, for example, NAA, A9525, PU109 and PU647.

38 NAA, A9525, PU69, Memorandum from L Potter, Senior Investigator, to K Conwell, Deputy Director, 22 August 1990.

39 See, for example, NAA, A9525, PU197.

originally created for their migration documents.⁴⁰ In any case, many interviewees put a halt to these informal interviews by simply terminating the interview themselves, or calling a solicitor after the first contact, who then advised them against speaking to the investigators. Examples include Lithuanian Pranas A. who, after speaking to a solicitor, said: 'I think I was in the [12th Lithuanian Auxiliary Police] Battalion' - implicated in the mass killings of Jews in Lithuania and Belarus - 'and I don't have to say anything'.⁴¹ Sometimes a reliance on the law came with an admission of guilt. Andrey M., accused of working as head of the political department of the criminal police (*Kripo*) in Vinnitsa, Ukraine, where he was alleged to have been involved in shooting Jews, said: 'Part of this allegation is real. That's true. Not all ... You can't prove no one thing, I killed anybody. No way, no way'.⁴² Similarly, Lithuanian Antanas G.'s solicitor admitted: 'there's not a lot of trust in his side because for all he knows this is just coming down to the end, to the dark end', that is, a full criminal trial for his role as deputy to commander Dr Werner Loew, who murdered 7,000 in Kupiškis, Lithuania.⁴³

Complicit Testimonies

In the main, the interviews evoke the vocabulary modelled by the regime: euphemisms, denial, and justifications including a perceived lack of agency and an explicit antisemitism.⁴⁴ Other arguments, including that suspects had actually saved Jews, reflect the strategies of individuals attempting to manoeuvre within a western judicial framework. Reading 'against the grain' of this archive, however, serves to illuminate a powerful narrative of culpability. Indeed, a number of suspects made candid admissions of shocking crimes. Grouping these thematically under the subheadings of denials and grey zones, victim-perpetrator inversions, and heroic narratives makes clear the various exculpatory arguments used by the suspects. In stark contrast were those who brazenly admitted culpability.

⁴⁰ See Aubin, p. 164.

⁴¹ NAA, A9525, PU637, Interview with Pranas A., 13 April 1992.

⁴² NAA, A9525, PU690, Interview with Andrey M., 17 December 1992.

⁴³ NAA, A9525, PU562, Interview with Antanas G., 5 March 1991.

⁴⁴ Leigh A. Payne, 'Unsettling Accounts: Perpetrators' Confessions in the Aftermath of State Violence and Armed Conflict', in *The Routledge International Handbook of Perpetrator Studies*, ed. by Susanne C. Knittel, Zachary J. Goldberg, p. 130-39.

DENIALS AND GREY ZONES

Some interviewees initially reacted to allegations with statements of incredulity and vehement denials, including: 'I couldn't kill a fly' and 'I haven't touched the hair of anybody'.⁴⁵ Vytautas V. said: 'I have never molested or killed anyone. As a Boy Scout I never killed wild animals also', while Jonas L. argued that he 'couldn't hit a seal. I hate even hunting. I never had anything to do with it. I never fired a shot at a person'.⁴⁶ Latvian Valis-Jekabs M., accused of participating in a mass execution at Kukas marshes, said that instead he had wanted to avoid the *Aktion*, and so stayed in the barracks and got drunk instead.⁴⁷

Others argued that complicity involved unclear and ambiguous choices. As Central and Eastern Europeans under the German occupation, they inhabited a 'grey zone' of structural complicity, famously described by Primo Levi as a liminal space that is 'poorly defined, where the two camps of masters and servants both diverge and converge'.⁴⁸ Ivan Polyukhovich – accused of taking part in individual and mass shootings as a Ukrainian area policeman (*Gebietspolizei*), and the only suspect to undergo a full trial – argued that 'so many things happened during the war' including 'Russian, German and Jewish partisans, all killing people, confusion, accusations and hatred'.⁴⁹ Ivan S., accused of belonging to the SS *Wachmann* at Trawniki and later serving as a guard at Sobibor death camp, said: 'In the war you do anything to survive. I had a uniform, they gave me one'.⁵⁰ The nephew of one suspect followed investigators out of the house, 'attempting to justify his own position during the war by stating that everyone had to comply with the orders of the Germans and later the Russians'; somewhat ironically, this action led to an investigative file being opened on the nephew as well as the original suspect.⁵¹

45 NAA, A9525, PU152, Interview with Juozas B., 29 January 1991; NAA, A9525, PU197, Interview with Jonas A., 12 November 1990; NAA, A9525, PU662, Interview with Juozas S., 14 April 1992.

46 NAA, A9525, PU514, Letter from Vytautas V. to Greenwood, 15 April 1990; NAA, A9525, PU23, Interview of Jonas L., 7 June 1989.

47 Attorney-General's Department, *Report of the Investigations of War Criminals in Australia*, p. 103. Of course, many perpetrators regularly drank alcohol to excess. See David Alan Rich, 'Reinhard's Footsoldiers: Soviet Trophy Documents and Investigative Records as Sources', in *Remembering for the Future: The Holocaust in an Age of Genocide*, eds. John K. Roth and others (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), pp. 688–701 (p. 694).

48 Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. by Raymond Rosenthal (London: Abacus, 1989), pp. 22–51. See Claudia Card, 'Women, Evil, and Gray Zones', *Metaphilosophy*, 31.5 (2000), 518–19.

49 'I'm that man, but I'm no war criminal', says pensioner', *Adelaide Advertiser*, 30 December 1986.

50 NAA, A9525, PU264, Interview with Ivan S, 10 January 1989.

51 Attorney-General's Department, *Report of the Investigations of War Criminals in Australia*, p. 284.

VICTIM-PERPETRATOR INVERSIONS

Some suspects went further, following a long-standing attempt by advocates to argue for a 'perpetrator-victim inversion': that the crimes of the Soviet Union were 'genocidal' and were equivalent to or outweighed the Holocaust.⁵² These Eastern European nationalists were used to thinking of themselves solely as victims of the Soviet Union. Zigmas P., for example, admitted joining the 12th Lithuanian Auxiliary Police Battalion, which he explained was due to his reaction at seeing the Russians 'shoot a 60-year-old woman'.⁵³ Jonas A., accused by an eyewitness of leading executions in Lithuania, began his interview by describing the 'grave of 72 tortured Lithuanian people' his group had discovered in the aftermath of the first Russian invasion.⁵⁴ And of course the Nazi trope of Judeo-Bolshevism – that all Jews were Soviet communists and so bore responsibility for their own persecution – worked to make sense of Jewish killings. Antanas I., a wartime colleague of Antanas G. above, described those shot in Kupiškis as 'more or less people who during [the] Russian 12 months stay, [were] people who deported Lithuanians'. Upon closer questioning, he reluctantly admitted that this included 'some Jews'.⁵⁵

Other interviewees were explicitly antisemitic. Historian Wendy Lower has noted that Holocaust denial and a continuing antisemitic world view has its roots in the ideology of the Third Reich: 'most Nazi perpetrators and their accomplices – and even many witnesses – could not empathise with the Jews, during the war or after'.⁵⁶ Thus, alleged war criminals continued to 'perform' antisemitism as an expression of their 'phenomenological world'.⁵⁷ One family member queried the 'ethnic background of the staff at the Special Investigations Unit', particularly focusing on Robert Greenwood QC, 'who he thought was Jewish'.⁵⁸ Lithuanian Bronislovas T. similarly asked investigator Bill Beale: 'You

52 Gabriele Rosenthal, 'National Socialism and Anti-Semitism in Intergenerational Dialogue', in *The Holocaust in Three Generations: Families of Victims and Perpetrators of the Nazi Regime*, ed. by Gabriele Rosenthal (Opladen & Framington Hills, MI: Barbara Budrich Publishers, 2010), p. 311.

53 NAA, A9525, PU647, Interview with Zigmas P., 13 August 1990.

54 NAA, A9525, PU197, Interview with Jonas A., 17 January 1991.

55 NAA, A9525, PU561, Interview with Antanas I., 9 November 1989.

56 Wendy Lower, *Hitler's Furies: German Women in the Nazi Killing Fields* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2013), p. 157.

57 Sumner B. Twiss, 'Can a Perpetrator Write a *Testimonio*? Moral Lessons from the Dark Side', *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 38.1 (2010), 5–42.

58 NAA, A9525, PU264, Memorandum from Richard Letchford to Robert Greenwood, 13 January 1989.

are a Jew yourself, right? You look like a Jew.⁵⁹ During another interview, investigator John Ralston felt the need to reassure Lithuanian Juozas S. that ‘we are not Jewish people, none of us are Jewish people’.⁶⁰

Some interviewees used a mix of justifications: the perpetrator-victim inversion and/or antisemitism, as well as what has become a customary defence against personal culpability – admission of eyewitness status rather than admission of direct participation. In other words, as Antanas S. said: ‘Somebody did it. I was there but I don’t know who did it’.⁶¹ Filip K., for example, was accused of participating, as a Ukrainian auxiliary policeman, in a mass shooting of ‘2,000 civil citizens, Jews mainly, in Smolyarnya woods’, as well as shooting infant and child ‘escapees’.⁶² In an initial interview, Filip set the scene:

Ukrainians were shooting. Outside the ghetto. Saw Germans were taking Jews into field, my house was on hill, saw Jews were going up, saw Germans were shooting Jews. There was truck taking Jews to sand hill, put them in pit, blow the sand hill up to cover bodies. Yes shooting going on, many, many old Jews all shot by Germans.

Filip admitted to assisting in ‘moving the Jews’ but not to participating in the shooting. In justification, he argued not only for the perpetrator-victim inversion, but also that he was required to follow orders: ‘remember, they [the Jews/Bolsheviks] shot my mother and also I had to do what I was told by the Police’.⁶³ By the time of a second interview, a few months later, investigators reported that ‘he has obviously had a think about this last interview’ and was now stating that ‘another [Filip] had been responsible for shooting Jews and that we had probably confused him with this person’.⁶⁴

Similarly, Pavel S. admitted being a member of a police unit in Turets, Byelorussia, and described the first ‘killing of the Jews’ around

59 NAA, A9525, PU250, Interview with Bronislovas T., 20 July 1989.

60 NAA, A9525, PU662, Interview with Juozas S., 14 April 1992. Similarly, in the United Kingdom, ‘whether by accident or design’, there were no Jewish investigators. John Silverman and Robert Sherwood, *Safe Haven: The United Kingdom’s Investigations into Nazi Collaborators and the Failure of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), p. 54.

61 NAA, A9525, PU510, Interview with Antanas S., 15 April 1992.

62 NAA, A9525, PU 245, ‘APPEAL to Parliament and Government of Australia from public gathering of the town of Vladimirets, Rovno region, Ukraine SSR, 27 May 1988’, and ‘Information on K Philip Ivanovich’, undated.

63 NAA, A9525, PU104, Interview with Filip K., 26 June 1989.

64 NAA, A9525, PU104, Interview with Filip K., 5 September 1989.

August 1941: 'I was told by other villagers that 40 Jewish men were taken to the Jewish cemetery by the Germans, and these men were shot'. The second killing, a few months later, was carried out by 'the Germans and local police'. Although a police officer, Pavel said that he was an eyewitness only, watching from a window:

I saw a group of Jews, old men, old women, men, women and children. Some were so sick that they were being driven on carts. The Jews were taken to the cemetery. I heard the shooting. It started at about 8 or 9 in the morning but by 12 noon it was finished ... I did not go to the site of the shooting but some local people from the village were used to cover the pits. After the shooting I saw the carts coming back with the clothes of the Jewish people on them.

After this second mass killing, 'there were no more Jews left in our village'. Pavel insisted that despite carrying a rifle as a member of the police unit, he had not taken part in 'the killing of any villagers or the shooting of any persons'.⁶⁵

Also asserting bystander status was Edward B., who had been accused by his relatives in Latvia of 'killing people with gas' [i.e. with the use of gas vans] and 'transporting people in covered trucks'; his father was apparently German and three of his close friends had been members of the SS. Another informant alleged that Edward had brought a number of gold teeth to Australia. Edward did admit that during the war he could hear shooting as his home was on the edge of a forest, and was aware that Jewish people were being killed. His late wife had apparently told one of the informants that executions had taken place on a daily basis, and that on one occasion they had turned a survivor away from the house.⁶⁶

HEROIC NARRATIVES

As well as claiming bystander or witness status, a number of suspects centred themselves in heroic narratives, arguing that they had been sympathetic to Jewish suffering.⁶⁷ They were thus misunderstood

65 NAA, 9525, PU443, Interview with Pavel S., 11 March 1992.

66 Attorney-General's Department, *Report of the Investigations of War Criminals in Australia*, pp. 510-11.

67 Hirsekorn and Vice, p. 577; Payne, p. 132.

‘victims and heroes’ rather than perpetrators.⁶⁸ Lithuanian Bolys K., for example, was accused of giving orders for the arrest and shooting of around 300 Jews immediately prior to the German occupation in 1941. In an unpublished letter to the *Sunday Mail* (Adelaide), responding to an article about Simon Wiesenthal, Bolys stated that he believed that he was ‘no. 1 on the Wiesenthal list of war criminals’. Relying on familiar tropes, he blamed both communist Russia and fascist Germany for trying to destroy the Baltic states and the Jews, and noted that the tragedy that had beset the Jewish community had also struck Lithuanian ‘families and children’. Forwarding a copy of this letter to Prime Minister Robert Menzies, Bolys admitted to being a ‘former Lithuanian security police detective inspector’ and described himself as a ‘freedom fighter’ against both the Communists and the Nazis.⁶⁹

Bolys was, indeed, on a list of alleged perpetrators: no. 90 on a list supplied by the Soviet Procurator. Upon request, he provided a statement to the Special Investigation Unit in 1987,⁷⁰ in which he admitted being a member of the partisans prior to the German occupation, and then a coerced member of the security police thereafter: ‘I was told to withdraw my resignation [from the police] or I would be sent to Kacet Concentration Camp’. While loquacious with regard to his time in displaced persons camps, the wartime period was initially dealt with in one sentence: ‘I then went back and worked as a police officer again in town of Birzai under the Germans’. Denying the specific charge of direct involvement in a mass shooting immediately prior to German occupation, Bolys said instead that he witnessed Germans shooting Jews in 1941, and blamed the main Lithuanian collaborator, Mr Pozela, who he described as ‘a communist’. Placing himself solely in the capacity of a witness – ‘standing watching’ – he then described a mass shooting:

Pozela put a white sheet over his shoulders, like Moses, and led the 600–700 Jews to the paddocks. They made the Jews into groups of 10. They lined them up at the edge of the trench and the 28 men would shoot them, here were 2 persons shooting a person each with rifles, using exploding bullets (dum dums), the persons who fell into the trench and were not dead were finished off by Pozela, and the lieutenant with pistols.

68 See Jan Grabowski and Shira Klein, ‘Wikipedia’s Intentional Distortion of the History of the Holocaust’, *The Journal of Holocaust Research*, 37.2 (2023), 133–90.

69 NAA, A9525, PU46, Review by RH Gray, 1 July 1987, and Memorandum from William Beale, 25 June 1990.

70 NAA, A9525, PU46, Statement of Bolys K., 24 July 1987.

As well as acting solely as a (rather detailed) witness to this scene, Bolys also painted himself as someone lacking agency in a bathetic scene in which he managed to centre himself:

[A Jewish woman] called me asking for help. Then I went to Pozela and the lieutenant and asked him to release her. Pozela said to me, 'Anybody comes into this paddock does not get out'. I went back to her and told her I couldn't help because they wouldn't listen to me. When her urn came to be shot she stood at the trench and stood forward and said, 'Shoot me. Shoot me.' She said goodbye to me and they shot her. I could do nothing.⁷¹

Another suspect, Lithuanian Vytautas V., also leant into a heroic narrative, claiming that a 'German' once dared him to compete with him in shooting a Jew some distance away; in response, Vytautas got his 'pistol out and put it to [the German's] head and said, "Just you try", and [the German] stopped and put down his rifle'.⁷² Ukrainian Nikita L., accused of murdering Jews, also described a heroic incident that occurred when he was guarding a prison in Zhitomir. A group of young women were being held in a nearby school building, and he claimed to have freed five of them by opening a window. Another suspect protested that instead of killing Jews, he had in fact been searching for his Jewish sweetheart and never made it home.⁷³

ADMISSIONS OF CULPABILITY

While most suspects were solely interested in loudly proclaiming their innocence, stating their role as eyewitness or bystander, and even grandstanding as heroes, some suspects made candid, shocking admissions of the commission of heinous crimes.⁷⁴ In his interview, Stasys R., alleged to have been a member of the Lithuanian 12th Battalion involved in mass killings, described a ghetto clearance:

⁷¹ NAA, A9525, PU46, Statement of Bolys K., 24 July 1987.

⁷² NAA, A9525, PU534, Interview with Vytautas V., 8 March 1989.

⁷³ Attorney-General's Department, *Report of the Investigations of War Criminals in Australia*, pp. 524, 531.

⁷⁴ See Leon Goldensohn, *The Nuremberg Interviews: An American Psychiatrist's Conversations with the Defendants and Witnesses*, ed. and introduced by Robert Gellately (New York: Vintage, 2005), p. 14; Adam S. Fells, 'OSI's Prosecution of World War II Nazi Persecutor Cases', *United States Attorneys' Bulletin*, 54.1 (2006), 9-10.

The Jews said, 'Help us, help', you know? [There were] two trucks standing, one standing with a machine gun and there's a man standing guard it. I think couple was German soldiers and all the men, all the day asking them, 'please don't take me, I have wife, I have kids, I didn't'. Go in trucks. About 40-50 men, one German here, one German there, with gun. And then go to the bush all ... who died.⁷⁵

Stasys's part in the action is not clear – and no interpreter was ever used – although at one point he said: 'I have ... those standing [German soldiers] so I put [the Jews] in the bush or shot ... I saw them graves, big graves ... I've been soldier all night. I not like it.'⁷⁶ While this is a frustratingly incomplete transcription, Stasys here seems to be admitting that he was involved in transporting, guarding and shooting Jews. Similarly, Lithuanian Leonas P., accused of being a member of an execution squad, admitted that he had guarded the Jewish ghetto at Vilnius, which involved shooting Jews: 'If he run away I have to shoot him. Or try to shoot him.'⁷⁷

Dezsol S. was approached by the Special Investigations Unit because in 1970, while being interviewed by the Commonwealth Police in relation to Croatian activities in Australia, he had volunteered that he had been a Hungarian Army officer attached to the Croatian Ustaša: Croatian Revolutionary Movement (*Ustaša: Hrvatski revolucionarni pokret*) during the war. In his 1992 interview he made a number of shocking admissions indicating that he had engaged in a series of criminal wartime activities, including a retaliatory action against partisans in Belarus in 1942: 'We put them under the railway tunnel, poured in diesel oil, and we burnt the lot'. Dezsol also admitted that after subsequently joining the SS, he had led a *Waffen*-SS squadron in quashing the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in 1943: 'We were indiscriminately shooting everybody. The order was given to me to bring down the ghetto.'⁷⁸

Similarly, Lithuanian Vytautas U. volunteered during an interview that he had once tied a man 'to a tree and put water on him so he died slow like the dog he was; I didn't want him to die too fast'. This man had apparently been a Lithuanian who had 'killed many people'; Vytautas claimed that he once saw him 'pick up a baby and hit it on the head with his gun'.⁷⁹ Vytautas's son informed investigators that his father had once

75 NAA, A9525, PU651, Interview with Stasys R, 14 April 1992.

76 Ibid.

77 Attorney-General's Department, Report of the Investigations of War Criminals in Australia, p. 71.

78 Ibid., pp. 231, 343-44.

79 NAA, A9525, PU514, Interview with Vytautas U., 18 November 1988.

told him a heroic anecdote related to an execution site: that 'a German soldier smashed his teeth with a rifle butt because he tried to save a child from execution'. This of course raised the question of what Vytautas was doing near an execution site if he was not involved.⁸⁰ However, once again, 'despite strenuous efforts', the Special Investigations Unit was unable to substantiate the allegation.⁸¹

Conclusion

Ultimately, only four individual files were referred to the Director of Public Prosecutions; three were charged and reached the stage of committal hearings: seventy-eight-year-old Mikolay Berezowsky, sixty-nine-year-old Heinrich Wagner and seventy-five-year-old Ivan Polyukhovich.⁸² Importantly, in all three cases there were eyewitnesses still alive and willing to give evidence at trial, and all three cases involved Ukrainian mass killing sites that could be verified forensically.⁸³ However, only one case, that of Polyukhovich, went to full trial, and ultimately the defendant was acquitted. The Special Investigations Unit was disestablished in 1992.

The Australian investigative files are just a very small sample of suspected perpetrator testimonies from the many post-war Central and Eastern European perpetrators who went on to resettle in the West. In Australia, acts of individual perpetration proved impossible to prosecute, in a judicial process that historian Richards Plavniek has described as 'palpably unsatisfying'. The repeated use of falsehoods and obfuscation, and claims of coercion, eyewitness status and moments of heroism continued to serve perpetrators within the displaced persons cohort well. Further, even those who admitted to committing acts of perpetration were not charged. These testimonies do, however, serve 'the cause of truth', as they are indicative of the continuation of post-war

⁸⁰ Ibid., Report, undated.

⁸¹ Attorney-General's Department, *Report of the Investigations of War Criminals in Australia*, pp. 231, 343-44.

⁸² For an analysis of the Wagner case, see Krzysztof Lada and Peter Monteath, 'One Day in Israylovka: A Case Study of the Holocaust in Southeastern Ukraine', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 31.1 (2017), 61-86. For a comprehensive discussion of the Polyukhovich case, see Bevan, *A Case to Answer*.

⁸³ Peggy O'Donnell, "Gateway to Hell": A Nazi Mass Grave, Forensic Scientists, and an Australian War Crimes Trial', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 32.3 (2018), 368. Some of these artefacts are now exhibited at the Sydney Jewish Museum: <<https://sydneyjewishmuseum.com.au/online-excursion/unearting-the-holocaust-erniki-and-the-australian-war-crimes-trials/>> [accessed 1 June 2023].

justifications used by suspects: pragmatically, in order to evade any form of retributive justice, and epistemologically, showcasing the world view that makes sense of their actions.⁸⁴ The investigative work undertaken by the Australian authorities did, ultimately, create a valuable archive of non-German alleged perpetrator complicity with the crimes of the Holocaust. This archival testimony shows that individual, low-agency perpetrators were complicit – and continued to be complicit – with the vast and multifaceted structure of the German-led Holocaust.

84 Plavnieks, *Nazi Collaborators on Trial During the Cold War*, pp. 7, 12.

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