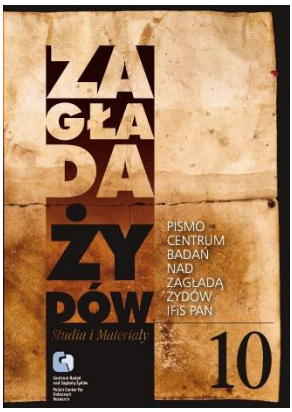

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"That Entire Jewish Band Is Finally Dead." Extermination of Jews as presented in 1942 letters of German soldiers

„Ta cała banda żydowska zdechła nareszcie". Eksterminacja Żydów w listach żołnierzy niemieckich z 1942 r.

Marcin Zaremba
Institute of History, Warsaw University; Institute of Political Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences

mzar@isppan.waw.pl
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5036-1793

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Marcin Zaremba

"That load of Jews is finally dead." Extermination of Jews as presented in 1942 letters of German soldiers

To find and analyse opinions of "ordinary Germans" about the "final solution" is a difficult task. It is hampered by lack of a sufficient number of sources that would enable one to know their real views, which were not allowed to be freely presented in public if different from the official standpoint of the regime. It is not only about the absence of free media, which express unbiased judgments and assessments, or lack of centres for public opinion research. It is about fear that silences people, the best building block of adaptation. The war itself induced not only Germans to seek refuge in privacy and avoidance of political declarations, including statements about the Jews. Marcin Kula called the condition of people in the Communist system the "dumbness of the incapacitated."[1] While researching public opinion in the Third Reich, one encounters a similar phenomenon.

There is yet another problem related to the "Jewish question". Ian Kershaw, an outstanding researcher of the topic, emphasised its rare appearances in different reports by various agencies of the Nazi regime concerning the moods in German society.[2] One more difficulty lies in the impossibility of indicating the dominant opinions on the basis of source materials. The thesis that the Germans had no knowledge about the extermination was undermined a long time ago, but the question of how much they knew is still relevant, just as the question what the Western Allies knew about the atrocities taking place in the occupied territories of Poland and the Soviet Union. What was their knowledge about the Holocaust? There is one source that can help find answers to those questions.

Since 1983, when Ortwin Buchenbender and Reinhold Sterz published a book devoted to letters written by Wehrmacht soldiers, it has been known how precious the source is for learning about their opinions and emotions.[3] Similar

[1] Marcin Kula, "Niemota ubezwłasnowolnionych", *Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość* 1 (2002): 55–72.

[2] Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, the Germans, and the Final Solution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 216.

[3] Ortwin Buchenbender, Reinhold Sterz, *Das andere Gesicht des Krieges. Deutsche Feldpostbriefe 1939–1945* (München: C.H. Beck, 1983).

publications, based on letter sources, appeared in the following years.[4] A keen and often surprising insight into the German soldiers' mentality was provided by the stenographic record of interviews with German prisoners of war taken secretly by the British and the American intelligence services and discovered by Sönke Neitzel in 2001. In the book, written together with social psychologist Harald Welzer, the authors describe various aspects of the experience of war and focus on the reconstruction of prisoners' psychology. There is a separate chapter devoted to their attitude towards the Jews.[5] Another recent publication presents letters of a German teacher who served in a reserve battalion in Poland and Russia.[6] Few know, however, that the State Archive of New Records in Warsaw has preserved a large collection of Germans' private correspondence intercepted by the Polish underground.

Since 1941, the intelligence of the Warsaw District of the Union of Armed Struggle (*Związek Walki Zbrojnej*, ZWZ) and since February 1942 of the Home Army (*Armia Krajowa, AK*) started intercepting letters written by German privates, officers and officials (including policemen) to their families, as well as letters sent from Germany to one's friends and relatives at the front. A network of agents was intercepting and opening them, taking photographs and forwarding them to the addressees with the smallest delay possible so that their interference was not discovered. Initially, up to 2,000 letters were intercepted within a month. In 1942, their number grew to more than 6,000.[7] Their copies were handed over to a secret group of translators who prepared excerpts from the letters. Sometimes they quoted single sentences, other times – almost the whole content. Yet the work on the letters did not end at this point. The raw intelligence material was then processed by different units of the Department of War Studies at the 2nd Division of the Main Command of ZWZ-AK. Partial reports were drafted in the units and then sent to the Head of the Department of War Studies, who formed them into a synthetic military situation report. Sometimes there were various documents attached, for example maps or war installation plans. The whole documentation was microfilmed and sent by courier service to London, where it was translated into English.[8]

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[4] Among others, Veit Didczuneit, Jens Ebert, Thomas Jander, *Schreiben im Krieg – Schreiben vom Krieg: Feldpost im Zeitalter der Weltkriege* (Essen: Klartex, 2011).

[5] Harold Welzer, Sönke Neitzel, *Soldaten. On Fighting, Killing and Dying. The Secret Second World War. Tapes of German Pows* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012).

[6] *Reluctant Accomplice: A Wehrmacht Soldier's Letters from the Eastern Front*, ed. Konrad H. Jaraush (Princeton–Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011).

[7] Archiwum Akt Nowych [Archive of Modern Records, later: AAN], AK, 203/I-18, Report No. 122 [the letters were written in March–April 1942], p. 177.

[8] For more information on the 'technology' of the report production and the structure of the Department of War Studies see: Ziemowit Chomiczewski, "Pion studialny Oddziału II Komendy Głównej ZWZ-AK 1939–1944. Zarys historii," in *Wywiad i kontrwywiad Armii Krajowej*, ed. Władysław Bułhak (Warszawa: IPN, 2008), pp. 78–113.

The monthly reports consisted of three parts. The first one was devoted to strictly military issues: German ground and air forces and navy. The second part included economic information. The third one entitled "Moods" was prepared by the Office of Propaganda and Mood Studies. It consisted of a psycho-social analysis of what is commonly called soldiers' morale and thus focused on the intensity of their faith in victory and emphasised soldiers' and officers' opinions and views on the situation at the front, emotions, feelings and reactions. The following words are found in a report dated February 1942, "Cruelty has become a habit for many." The quote is supported by a letter written by a German non-commissioned officer, "To hang such a hoodlum is a beautiful thing. I've often had this pleasure in recent days. They'd call us a gang of thugs at home [...], but we shouldn't be blamed but understood. We've lost our nerves, we're no longer humans. No one should be surprised at what we do here. We have no mercy as nobody has mercy on us either."[9] The third part of the reports described the moods not only in the army but also among German civilians, including their reactions to the Allies' air raids, for instance, "In general and without any fear of making a great mistake, the atmosphere in the Reich could be still described as general passivity and resignation."[10]

The reports rarely mentioned of the fate of the Poles and the Jews and, if they did, those were usually to illustrate the attitudes and emotional state of the German soldiers. Crimes against civilians were documented by the Department of Information and Press of the Government Delegation for Poland, which prepared special reports on the subject, entitled Pro Memoria.[11] These were transferred to London as well.

It is difficult to say what percentage of the data contained in the reports came from the letters. The Home Army had an extended intelligence network, and those involved in preparing the reports did not always provide their source of information. The fact that the letters constituted an excellent source for the military intelligence is, however, undisputed. They were used for two main purposes: firstly, to determine the movements of the German army, directions of attack, dislocation of units etc.; secondly, to prepare the last part of the reports devoted to moods. Only the very essence of the letters was used, their content being in most cases summarised. For example, a report of September 1941 reads as follows, "The most serious source is soldiers' letters to their families written from different sections of the front line in July-August and the beginning of September. We know copies of around 200 such letters. What is striking about them is the complete lack of fanfaronade and enthusiasm. 'Patriotic' letters are uncommon."

[9] AAN, AK, 203/I-18, Report No. 110, p. 45.

[10] Ibidem, p. 51.

[11] *Pro Memoria (1941–1944). Raporty Departamentu Informacji Delegatury Rządu na Kraj o zbrodniach na narodzie polskim*, ed. Janusz Gmitruk, Arkadiusz Indraszczyk, Adam Koseski (Warszawa–Pułtusk: Aspra-JR, 2004/2005).

The majority of the underground intelligence reports were probably destroyed in England after the war. In any event, British historians did not use that source when they analysed the moods in the army and in German society.[12] No one in Poland has made any attempt to research this issue with the use of the intelligence materials stored for that purpose in AAN either.

I wish to use three examples to illustrate how valuable the monthly reports can be for research on the attitudes and opinions of "ordinary Germans" as regards the Holocaust. The first one is a sentence from report No. 76 d/8/41: "Several communist symptoms have been recorded among military men, and it appears from searching for contact with local communists that there is a large percentage of communists in one of the branches of the Todt Organisation, who maintain contact with the Jews."[13]

The second example is an excerpt from a commentary on a letter that was so explicit that the officers who prepared the report quoted almost the whole document, "Apart from the information about the brutal treatment they [Soviet prisoners of war – M.Z.] suffered at the hands of the guards, we received a letter written by a soldier from a guards detachment in an undefined camp. Full of complete lack of understanding that the prisoners were hungry and filled with contempt for Bolsheviks, the letter deserves to be quoted in its entirety. 'I and my colleagues are supposed to establish a camp for prisoners of war. We received 10,000 of them within just two days; you can imagine what was going on here. That mob was haggard and ravenous. We'd had another transport a bit earlier. It was a bunch of wild savages! One evening, that horde tried to capture the kitchen. They even set fire to the building. But they weren't lucky: six of them had to pay with their lives for it. They took a beating while they were clearing away the rubble. In the evening, while being driven out, they received another beating, so since then they didn't feel like such excesses any more. Asians are the worst ones. It's a nation of nothing but criminals. You won't believe what's happening here. Those who don't have contact with it would call us crazy. We had to shoot at them quite often in the first days. When one of them fell dead, before he even stopped moving, they would throw themselves at him and take everything he had, even though they had the same themselves, and there is no fabrication in these descriptions. It happened twice, one after another, that they ate a corpse. Once they even killed someone and devoured the body piece by piece. They're savages, a mob that can't be satiated or educated. When it comes to them, everything has to be done by force. What would happen to our cities and our women if that horde managed

[12] I intentionally pass over the following valuable but very general study: *Intelligence Co-operation Between Poland and Great Britain During World War II: The Report of the Anglo-Polish Historical Committee*], vol. 1, ed. Tessa Stirling, Daria Nałęcz, Tadeusz Dubicki (London–Portland: Naczelna Dyrekcja Archiwów Państwowych, 2005).

[13] AAN, AK, 203/I-16, pp. 54–55.

to invade Germany? Fortunately, our leader has prevented all that in his wise anticipation.'"[14]

The third example, probably the most surprising one, is a summary of an unknown document written by a German Gendarmerie officer, probably at the end of 1941, about death sentences passed on soldiers who refused to carry out the order to take part in the execution of Jews. "In a series of cases in Ukraine, soldiers refused to assist at mass executions of Jews. Death sentences for the rebels did not work; individual commands were forced to resign from further executions (a testimony of a Gendarmerie officer who conducted an investigation into those cases)."[15]

Although literature on the subject offers a well-established list of answers to the fundamental question why "ordinary Germans" committed mass crimes, it does not contain any reference to the motive of fear of the consequences of disobedience. Most of the researchers emphasise that the members of Einsatzgruppen or police squads or Wehrmacht soldiers could always refuse to take part in executions of civilians without the threat of serious disciplinary consequences. During court trials of Nazi criminals that took place in Germany in the 1960s, the line of defence that maintained that failure to obey such orders was punishable by death was not confirmed despite thorough archive research. Can the current explanations and interpretations change at least partially in the light of the two quoted sentences? Will the above-mentioned list have to be updated with a new item about the fear of death penalty for not obeying an order? It is too early to answer such questions. Convicted soldiers could also have committed other acts of insubordination: attempts at desertion, theft, arguments with their superiors, fights etc., which – when accumulated – could have been the real reason for them facing the firing squad. One cannot rule out the possibility of the German gendarme's letter being translated incorrectly either. The history of intelligence is full of examples of wrong opinions and analyses. It is worth highlighting, however, that the reports were often signed by "Kalina" that is General Stefan Rowecki, Commander of AK, which suggests that they must have been prepared by the best military analysts and with the greatest care possible in those circumstances.

Nevertheless, the purpose of this article is not to analyse the effects of activities undertaken by the Polish intelligence service but to present unknown letters about the Holocaust written by German soldiers. For there is not only a part of the monthly reports of the Department of War Studies kept in AAN but also the source material used for their preparation: letter excerpts.[16] Considering the comments left by the translators and photographers, it seems unlikely that the excerpts were sent to England as attachments.

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[14] AAN, AK, 203/I-16, Report No. 81, 29 October 1941, pp. 228–229.

[15] AAN, AK, 203/I-16, Report No. 100, 31 January 1942, pp. 391–392.

[16] For the first short presentation of the letters see: Jerzy Kochanowski, Marcin Zaremba, "'Każdemu w łeb, wesoła robota'," *Polityka* 51 (2004).

Several folders have survived to this day, including the translations of altogether several hundred parts of letters. Most of them were sent from the eastern front or its rear in 1942. Written near Moscow or Stalingrad, they constitute an invaluable source of information about the contemporary attitudes, way of thinking, mentality and the effectiveness (or ineffectiveness) of propaganda. They mention hope, the atmosphere of deepening pessimism and the difficulties of life at the front: Russian mud and sharp frosts, fatigue and the wish to escape from the hell of war in the East.

Below are published only those letters, a small percentage of the whole collection that concern Poland and the Jewish population. A proportion of those who wrote to their friends or relatives did not even try to conceal the fact that they participated in crimes: executing partisans by firing squads, murdering Jews or liquidating ghettos. Even though much is already known about the brutalisation of the Second World War, the letters are still shocking. They are a terrifying testimony, especially so that one recognises "ordinary people" in their authors. The fact that they used linguistic clichés borrowed from the anti-Semitic propaganda proves its deep and unconscious internalisation. In the letters, murdering Jews is a part of the great plan to gain control over the world. But the extermination of the Jews was not an end in itself or a kind of intrinsic value for all of the authors. There was often craving for money hidden in the background. A photographer working for the Polish underground left the following note in one of the abstracts that among others contained letters from Brest-Litovsk: "The material from Brest-Litovsk contains correspondence of the police squads that liquidated the Jews in the ghetto. It can be concluded from the letters that their most important task after murdering Jews was theft on a grand scale and sending the stolen things to their homes in the Reich."

However, not all of the soldiers used hate speech (as one would call it today) in their letters, not all of them boasted about their thefts to their families. Some of them kept human feelings and approached the suffering and murdered Jews with empathy and compassion. "And yet they are people too," wrote a corporal from Saxony about Poles and Jews. But there was also an attitude in the middle of those two extremes – of authors who used an impassive language devoid of all emotions, of indifferent witnesses. They resemble travellers who described the peculiarities they saw. There is no doubt that the soldiers and their family members left in Germany knew what was happening in the East. But this material cannot be used as a basis to prove the "eliminationist anti-Semitism" that, according to Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, characterised the German nation and was oriented at the elimination of the Jews and almost genetically determined. What one actually sees is rather a gradual process of infecting others with cruelty, which was all the easier and faster as it concerned people who had witnessed the Eastern front.

Wrong names of streets, towns and cities in the quoted documents were corrected, full forms of military ranks were provided and punctuation was

improved. Date notation and its place in the headline were standardised. Notes from the translator from German are separated by slashes and those from the author of the study are written in brackets.[17]
Wehrmacht and SS military ranks used in the letters:
Soldat – Private,
Gefreiter – Lance Corporal,
Obergefreiter – Senior Lance Corporal,
Unteroffizier – Sergeant,
Oberleutnant – Senior Lieutenant,
Schütze (Waffen-SS) – SS-Private,
SS-Unterscharführer – SS-Sergeant,
SS-Hauptscharführer – SS-Staff Sergeant.

1

Unteroffizier Köhler to G. Köhler, Bayreuth, Hoffman von Fallersleben Straße 32, 12 September 1942

We are 15 km away from the front. We've heard how pilots manage in Nürnberg. My friend's wife wrote that we shouldn't believe everything they say and that it wasn't that bad at Gutenbergerstr 13. They were shooting but not always accurately; I hope what they won't touch is precisely Bayreuth; after all, there are no particularly important military facilities there. Northern and western German cities are experiencing really difficult moments now. But revenge will come, and it will be tenfold, just as our Führer said: when we are done with Russia, England will be slaughtered. The Führer said: do not be afraid, we will go. Those *untermenschen* don't imagine they can fight a war against innocent women and children with impunity. Everything will be avenged, and the victory will be on our side, no matter what they do.

Source: AAN, AK, 203/III-98, p. 11.

2

Sold[a]t Erich Lemke to Jos. Lemke, Berlin, 1 May 1942

Towns such as Baranavichy, Lyakhavichy, Slutsk and Babruysk are very devastated: there are districts with not even a house left... The Jews who have stayed here wear two stars on their clothes: one at the front and the other at the back, just as the Poles at our place. [Since December 1939, Poles living in the Reich were obliged to wear a patch with the letter P.]

Source: AAN, AK, 203/III-98, p. 49.

[17] I would like to thank Robert Brier and Stephan Lehnstaedt from the German Historical Institute in Warsaw for their help in decoding abbreviations and deciphering incorrectly recorded surnames and names of towns and cities.

3

Gefreiter H. Hirschnik to B. Hirschnik, Obs. Eberhach b/Radenburg Sachsen,[18] 25/26 September 1942

Worsening food growing scarce day by day proves there is nothing left. I receive three cigarettes per day. Here in Poland, in Sokolno /?/[19], they remove all the Jews, and those in hiding are shot and thrown to a mass grave. They took such a measure that when a Pole goes to a Jewish ghetto or is spotted there, he is shot there too; and the Jews still have valuables. And the Poles side with the Jews. And yet they are people too. It's high time the war ended.

Source: AAN, AK, 203/III-98, p. 145.

4

Gefreiter H. Hirschnik to A. Werner, Neuhof über Moritzburg, Sachsen, 25/26 September 1942

The services in the 6th Company are a massive fraud. We receive three cigarettes per day and have to buy the rest in the canteen, which doesn't have them any more either. The same goes for food: the masters take the best stuff, and we receive what is left. We shot several partisans when our company was on the road. In Sokolno, the Jews were driven to two rail wagons and then gassed and burnt. There are no more Jews here in Sokolno, and it has been done by the Polish police and the Gendarmerie. You have no idea what's happening here, what kind of sh*t it is... and there were families lying along the way and on the roads, and cattle were taken and killed. They posted a notice for the Poles that whoever goes to the Jews will be shot. And the Jews still have valuables. The army doesn't take part in such cases of shooting. Anyway, they wouldn't be able to finish that job and would have to call for reinforcements. We hoped it would end soon as we're all fed up with this, and it has lasted for too long.

Source: AAN, AK, 203/III-98, p. 145–146.

5

Soldier Hans Lustig – Hauptgestüt, Janów Podlaski Post [Post office] Biała Podlaska to M. Lustig, Frankfurt (Oder), Cottbuserstraße 7II, 23/25 September 1942

The expulsion of the Jews from Janów has been organised today. Janów had 5000 inhabitants, 3000 of whom were Jewish. But the General Government zone

[18] Most probably Ebersbach near Radeburg in Saxony.

[19] The question mark was left by the contemporary translator of the letter. There is no town of that name; perhaps the author meant Sokołów Podlaski, from which the Germans deported around 6,000 Jews to Treblinka on 22–23 September 1942.

must be cleared of all the Jews and become our homeland /Heimat/ starting from 1 October. 3 open narrow-gauge railway wagons were loaded and taken away. Then there was a long walking column and a row of carts /Panjewagen/ filled with junk, beds etc. Women carrying babies in their wombs and in their arms, old bags and men, everything all together surrounded by spasmodic cries and wailing. Two women were breastfeeding during the march, people were thrown upside down into the wagon, which is after all one metre high and there's no train depot; one was pushing the other; there were terrible screams and a horrible sight everywhere. It's supposed to continue tomorrow, and they will already know they won't be alive any more in a fortnight.[20] Poles will have more to eat then, and it will become cheaper too.

Source: AAN, AK, 203/III-98, p. 161.

6

R.W. Vendt, 7 /Pol. Regt. 23, G.G. Kielce. The sender stressed that the letter was going through "SS Feldpost". To Unteroffizier Fritz Hienitsch, Porgau, Fort Zinn / Personnel/. Letter written in Opoczno, 6 October 1942

... The post is handled very slowly here – I haven't been in Kielce for several weeks but stayed in the Polish robbers' town of Opoczno. They've assigned us here to a "hunting platoon" /Jagdzug/, and we're supposed to bring order to the poor neighbourhood, which is not that easy because they're most often gangs of 12 to 30 people who certainly don't have the worst weapons, so there are certain to be victims and even fatalities on our side. Those gangs are so arrogant that they attack even the military outposts of the /Diensstellen der Wehrmacht/ and shoot them down from their posts. So we are busy with searching day and night. We search one day here and the other day somewhere else, but we are more or less satisfied with the results. The battles are hard because they have nothing to lose. <u>And now the insurgent movement /2nd front/, that is mainly Polish officers, has joined the gangs</u> [Translator's underlining] ... How long we will keep hunting the thugs no one knows because when we shoot a few, there immediately come new ones from Warsaw.

Source: AAN, AK, 203/III-98, p. 196.

[20] Janów Podlaski had a population of 4010 in 1938, almost a half of which were Jews. On 8 October 1939, several hundred of them ran away together with the Red Army, which had taken the town under the Ribbentrop–Molotov Pact and was then retreating beyond the River Bug. On 23–24 September 1942, most of the Jews from the ghetto were taken to the ghetto in Biała Podlaska and from there further to the ghetto in Międzyrzec Podlaski. From Międzyrzec, they were deported to the death camp in Treblinka between 6 and 9 October.

7

Oberleutnant F. Frannek, Komandeur für Urlaubsuberwachung to wife Renata, Białystok, 30 October 1942

Guess with whom I do business here. With a Jew from the ghetto and through a Jewish girl /ineligible text/. People are very prone to swindle here.

Source: AAN, AK, 203/III-99, p. 22.

8

Willy Schneider[21] Schutzkomando to Familie Anton Hmenfeld [?], Köln-Ehrenfeld, Gutenbergerstr 13, 12 November 1942

The Jews here were sent to Abraham's bosom several weeks ago. I've visited the ghetto several times too. You can easily imagine it wasn't fruitless. I gathered a large basket full of laundry and clothing that I will take with myself or send to you.

No information about the town the author means [Translator's note].

Source: AAN, AK, 203/III-99, p. 40.

9

Otto Heid to Johann Mueller, Minsk [Belarus] Ostland, 12 November 1942

They're done with the Jews here;[22] some were killed in an inhumane way; they're heroes over defenceless women and children [sic!]. Such behaviour is inhumane. The Jewish district is deserted and looks devastated by war /the culture of the 20th century/.

Source: AAN, AK, 203/III-99, p. 41.

10

SS-Unterscharführer P. Teith from Zeit beim Kommandantur der Sipo und SD Brest-Litovsk – Aussenstelle an dem Herren Leiter u. Gefolgachafte d. Rpst. Saarbrücken I, 12 November 1942

[21] A singer from Cologne. He was famous most probably even before the war but especially after it ended.

[22] There were 75,000–80,000 Jews living in Minsk in autumn 1941, of which 55,000 were locals. Until 1943, the Germans performed several huge liquidation operations with the use of Latvian, Lithuanian and Ukrainian auxiliaries. The perpetrators used mobile gas chambers, but most of the victims were deported to the camp in Maly Trostenets and shot there. Their fate was shared by the Jews deported to Minsk from Germany (among others from Hamburg) and Austria. The last liquidation operation in the period preceding the writing of this letter took place towards the end of July and claimed several thousand victims. The final liquidation operation was performed in October 1943.

Since I left Saarbrücken, I've taken on my duties in the third place already. Fighting the gangs is sometimes as pleasant as at the front, but we keep fighting – that's proved by the news that arrives every day. The weather has been frosty for several days, so it's been the best chance to take action against the gangs in the marshes of Pripyat. Our work in the East is so diverse that on some days we have completely no idea where to begin. Thank God, we don't need any St. G. B. /?/ here. Those who are mature enough for a grave must enter it. With the finishing of the local Jewry, the activities of the gangs have ceased a little. I wish every colleague to be here during the cleansing of the ghetto. Such experiences can't be written down on a piece of paper. The people, who once sullied our cities too. Sadistic thinking aside, that work in Brest-Litovsk and Minsk pleased me enormously.

Source: AAN, AK, 203/III-99, p. 42–43.

11

Anna Lassota, Gebietskomisariat Brest-Litovsk, to Obergefreiter Rudolf to Poznań, 10 November 1942

An intimate letter, from a Polish woman to a German soldier. Among others, she asks if this is true that they are planning to do the same to the Poles as to the Jews. She urgently needs the answer because if this is the case, she would not let herself be put to death like that but buy herself some poison.

Wouldn't it be possible to somehow use the close relationship with that Polish woman? [Translator's note]

Source: AAN, AK, 203/III-99, p. 41.

12

Hauptscharführer Emil Fritsch,[23] SP and SD, Brest-Litovsk, 11 November 1942

My work consists of fighting thugs and persecuting the Jews, so it is the same thing that I've been doing so far. I have achieved a few things in that field already today /I've been here for almost four months/. My nerves have suffered a little again because that work shatters one's nerves, but it must be done.

Source: AAN, AK, 203/III-99, p. 43.

13

Paul Schneider to Gefreiter Karl Dorosh, Berlin, Brest-Litovsk, 12 November 1942

So I've been a soldier for more than eight weeks already; the first memory has gone. The ABC of a recruit can be tolerably learned. Firstly, I was in the cavalry in

[23] Probably the same Fritsch who took part in the execution of 81 women and 6 men from the camp in Hirzenhain in March 1945.

Furstebnwalde/Spree. From there I moved to Poznań, Gniezno and to the east, towards the front line...

[…]

Until recently, all the hard work at our place was done by Jewish men and women. Nobody out of 16,000 has survived now.[24] On the second night, all of them – from the smallest child /illegible text/. There were piles of corpses lying in the streets of the ghetto. Indeed, those who are soft-hearted and judge events by our faith, using compassion and mercifulness, face a conflict here. We are in the middle of a terrible judgment that God has imposed on crazy and hatred-driven mankind. If we didn't know about His promise of grace that will be sent to those who don't renounce him, we'd fall into despair.

Source: AAN, AK, 203/III-99, p. 56–57.

14

Schutz [probably Schütze SS] Almond Urlanber Sammelstelle Komp 6/Brest-Litovsk, to Marta Sutleben in Szczecin, 21 November 1942

How does the military situation look at the moment? Let's hope we win the war; otherwise, a bullet in one's head would be better to save trouble in the future. There is a chance I will receive an F65 gun. If so, just let some Pole or Russian try to attack me, and I won't show him any mercy. There are no more Jews here, no men, no women, no children – they're dead.

Source: AAN, AK, 203/III-99, p. 133.

15

Zgw. [Zeugwart? Zugführer?] Schmidt to Rudolf Schmidt, Wrocław 21 November 1942

The Jews once dug in, thinking we wouldn't find them. The issue has been resolved today; it is in the interest of each one of us that the Jewish question disappears.

Source: AAN, AK, 203/III-99, p. 134.

16

Gefreiter Press to Anna Press Askeran b[ei] Fuchsberg, 21 November 1942

[24] There were almost 17,000 Jews in the Brest-Litovsk Ghetto on 15 October 1942, the day when the liquidation action began. 16,000 of them were killed in the course of two following days. Several hundred, including elders and children, were killed in the ghetto. Most of the Jews were sent by train to Bronna Góra near Byaroza, where they were killed by German police officers.

The war will probably last for twice that long because as long as at least one Jew is alive, the war will continue. They took care of them here 14 days ago; 1800 Jews were shot in Brest-Litovsk itself. I'm going to take part in an operation in spring too: this battalion has already moved to the front and now serves as railway guard.

Source: AAN, AK, 203/III-99, p. 135.

17

Gefreiter Schäfer Urb. Sammel-komp[anie] 6 Brest-Litovsk a/Bug to G. Reuter, Nieder-Weisel Artp., 20/21 November 1942

There are going to be tough battles in northern Africa. So the time you mentioned has come, the terrible Prussian's fate, but the Führer will not help us [as in the original text, but should it rather be "will help"], he's the Lord's anointed that will turn our darkness into light! He will issue the right order at the right moment; I am slightly afraid, and my colleagues even more so. The time has come, even the Bible mentions that, but the Jews must be exterminated in the whole world. Many have learned to pray, and this is what supports them because it is only now that the real war begins.

Source: AAN, AK, 203/III-99, p. 136.

18

Gefreiter Theo Hubrig to Arno Hubrig, 24/25 November 1942

[...]

There is a huge tank factory located here. The Panzerwerk [tank factory] is of course already destroyed. Great modern buildings stand next to mean cabins. You wouldn't find such modernistic buildings at our place. Only Jewish minds could have come up with something like that. My battery has changed its position by several dozen kilometres again.

Source: AAN, AK, 203/III-99, p. 139.

19

Soldat Lehr to Sofie Lehr, Frankfurt, Zeil 38, 6/15 October 1942

There's no chance for leave this year; maybe May or June next year... all because of the Jews. They avoid us as much as possible here, and when they hear our footsteps, they move to the street and take their hats off. With the passing of time, everyone will disappear from the horizon here. It's high time we finished with those society outcasts. We shot 5000 people like that 30 km away from Pinsk. They had to undress completely, no matter whether men or women, after

which they met their end. It will happen to everyone. I won't write anything else, and please keep this to yourself so that it doesn't spread because you know what it could cause. That there are so many alarms and air raids at your place I learn from newspapers. As regards your question if our situation is worse than the situation of other soldiers, I can tell you one thing: the enemy we fight is invisible. We don't know if he attacks from the front or from the back or from both sides at once. And soldiers have their enemy in front of them and can see him. Our battalion is currently in the field, hunting partisans in knee-deep mud. If we weren't here, many farmsteads would be burnt. The peasants know that and give us everything they have to eat to show their gratitude.

Source: AAN, 203/III-100, p. 63.

20

F[eld] P[ost] Vetr. Gehilfe Boiek [?] No. 34448 to Roming, Berlin, Tempelhof, Goeringstr 3, 12–14 November 1942

17,000 Jews were murdered. It was so much fun! I watched it with pleasure. The city is quite nice, with many parks and greenery. Two cemeteries were established here for our fallen heroes. We expand them day by day. The cemeteries are so beautiful that one sometimes wishes to rest there forever among the heroes.

21

F[eld] P[ost] J. Kotli b[ei] Gebietskommisar Brest-Litovsk to Wffs. C. Kotli IV Inspektion O.A. Schule and Sohs. Truppen, Zoessen Kr. Flotow, 12–14 November 1942

We have a lot of work with the ghetto. Nobody knows when it will end. I have beautiful gifts for you: several furs, clothes, materials and so on. Snow fell on 6 November here, and it's freezing. They say those born in 1901 are supposed to be enlisted by the end of January, so perhaps I'll be forced into military fun too.

22

F[eld] P[ost] Wacht. Hunwald No. 34446 to Fritz Bieten, 12–14 November 1942

That load of Jews is finally dead. Anyway, there weren't many of them, just around 17,000. It was high time that mob was liquidated – they would have surely brought us even more misfortune. The partisans had a hard time: they either work in a different sector or lack ammunition. We take turns of 6–8 people, so don't be afraid.

Source: AAN, AK, 203/III-102, p. 38.

Translated by *Paulina Chojnowska*

Abstract
The Home Army intelligence intercepted letters written by German officers and clerks to their families as well as those sent from Germany to friends and relatives on the front line. On the basis of that correspondence the Polish underground drafted special intelligence reports, which were sent to London. The selection of letters devoted to the Holocaust presented in this article can make it easier to describe and understand the stances and opinions of "ordinary Germans" regarding the "final solution."

Keywords
Wehrmacht, soldiers' letters about the Holocaust, Poland and the eastern front line, AK intelligence