

From Gray Zones to Red Courts

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The project examines Soviet trials of former Jewish council members and ghetto policemen from ghettos in the Romanian occupation zone Transnistria. At least 52 such individuals were accused of collaboration by the Soviets between 1944 and 1949. Based on recently declassified case files from the former Ukrainian KGB archives, the presentation provides an overview of the trials and discusses two key questions. First, whether the Soviet military tribunals paid any attention to the circumstances of the “gray zone” (Primo Levi) in which the defendants had acted. Second, what role survivor witnesses played in the trials. Approaching the first question, a collective biography of the defendants is presented. An overview of trial outcomes specifies the rate of convictions, average sentences and the rate of acquittals. This data is compared with the respective statistics for non-Jewish defendants in the Soviet Union as a whole. While the majority of the defendants were sentenced to terms in the Gulag, a minority was acquitted. Drawing from in-depth qualitative case studies, various potential explanations for those acquittals are examined. These include bribes, communist party affiliation, etc., but also the possibility of genuine recognition of the moral dilemma defendants had faced in the ghettos. The presentation also approaches these trials “from below”, i.e. the witnesses’ viewpoint. Themselves survivors of the ghettos, witnesses addressed their grievances to the Soviet judiciary and voiced demands for retribution. In this context, the effect of social conflicts in the ghetto upon the trials is examined. The presentation will assess witnesses’ agency, both individual and collective (i.e. survivor networks) and weigh it against the structural constraints of the Soviet judiciary. Lastly, these findings are placed in the context of Soviet postwar reconstruction and the role of the trials in this process is discussed.