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Reply to review

by Tomasz Domański *Correcting the Picture? Some Reflections on the Use of Sources in Night without End: The Fate of Jews in Selected Counties of Occupied Poland, volumes 1-2* (Korekta obrazu? Refleksje źródłoznawcze wokół książki „Dalej jest noc. Losy Żydów w wybranych powiatach okupowanej Polski”) vol. 1-2, eds Barbara Engelking, Jan Grabowski, Warsaw 2018 (Polish-Jewish Studies, Institute of National Remembrance , Warsaw 2019)

In my response to Dr. Tomasz Domański's review, I will address several of his critiques of my work as well as some of his general remarks, which, I suppose, are addressed to all authors of our collective publication entitled *Night Without an End. Fate of Jews in Selected Counties of Occupied Poland*.

The reviewer, referring to fragments of the individual studies devoted to deportation campaigns and the length of those chapters, writes: "I do not deny the authors their right to independently choose the narration manner, but it seems that it is a duty of a historian to attach cardinal importance to presenting his detailed enunciations in such a way so as to lessen the distortion of the perception of the comprehensive picture of the Holocaust instead of deepening it" (Domański 22). Domański accuses us (though it remains unclear whether he is addressing all or only some of us) of emphasizing different aspects and producing texts varied in length. Each author who partook in this project, which aimed to examine the fate of the Jews during and after the 'deportation campaigns' (also called 'liquidation campaigns' by the Germans), was free to construct the text as they pleased and decide how much space they would devote to particular issues, so as to recreate the reality of the occupation period as faithfully as possible and illustrate the specificity of the given region. In some of the areas studied, the events of the liquidations were long-lasting and complex (for instance, in Miechów county), while in other areas only a single *Aktion* was conducted and in one day at that (in Bielsk-Podlaski county, for example). These distinctions determined the length of the text. In my 185-page text devoted to Biłgoraj Kreishauptmannschaft, the deportation campaigns are described in chapter "1942 — Extermination," which is forty-one pages long and is further divided into three subsections: "The Course of 'Liquidation Operations,'" "Geography of the Holocaust," and "Number of Victims." The texts written by the other authors vary in length, as do their chapters devoted to the campaigns — so what? The reviewer simply formulates a superficial objection and suggests that in this way, the authors "deepen the distortion of the perception of the comprehensive image of the Holocaust." I must stress that presenting a comprehensive picture of the Holocaust was certainly not our objective. Moreover, the reviewer considers it to be a mistake that we devoted less attention to the period before 1942, as "this treatment can give a less knowledgeable reader a false

impression of the Holocaust's course." It is obvious, however, that a book devoted predominantly to the period of 1942–1944/45 will focus on describing those very years.

The reviewer continues: "In the description of the third phase of the Holocaust stress was laid on the attitude of Polish society towards the Jews in line with the following doubtful thesis formulated as early as in the introduction: 'That was when the Polish population's attitude to a large extent conditioned the Jews' chances of survival' (Engelking, vol. 1, 13)" (Domański 23). First of all, why should the thesis not be formulated in the introduction? Does the reviewer think that the introduction was written at the beginning of our research, and that we adjusted our results to align with that thesis? The introduction of every publication is written at the end, constituting a summary of the research and an orientation to the text. Secondly, Domański's accusation that this thesis is "doubtful" must be substantiated, since our study proves the exact opposite.

The author of the review claims that we "regularly omitted" the historical context, which included the terror aimed at the entire society and the death penalty for helping Jews. Readers of *Night Without an End* can establish for themselves that this is not true. In my study, I address this context explicitly and clearly, while emphasizing the Jews' total removal from the law and their condemnation to physical extermination, which, however, was not implemented upon the remaining population. I also quote Hans Frank's ordinance of October 15th 1941, which introduced capital punishment for leaving ghettos and the provision of help to Jews (Engelking, vol. 1, 235). I regard the subsequent objections voiced by the reviewer as equally groundless (Domański 24–25). To address all of the issues postulated by Domański, each author would have to publish a lengthy book and, as a result, we would have nine instead of two volumes and a completely different research project. I wish to remark here that we do feel a certain dissatisfaction and discomfort on account of our inability to elaborate on some of the important threads in our texts, the length of which was limited. Some of us are continuing our research and intend to present the results in an extended book, where at least some of the issues brought up by the reviewer could be addressed or elaborated upon.

Next, the reviewer states with reference to my text and other authors: "Some methods used in this book necessarily give an impression of an even greater discrepancy between the fate of Jews and Poles by casting the latter in the role of simple observers, witnesses to the Jewish plight, who did not have to cope with any such problems. A characteristic example here is the manner in which Alina Skibińska quotes a fragment of a testimony given by Peasant Battalions member Florian 'Listek' Wójtowicz describing the appearance of the Jews from 'Jankiel's camp: 'they were so ragged, dirty, and miserable that one was afraid to look at them' (Engelking, vol. 1, 343). Meanwhile, in the original 'Listek' wrote: 'they were so ragged, dirty, and miserable that one was afraid to look at them, though we looked no better than they did [emphasis — T. D.]' I do not know whether the reader is intentionally led on here so that the appropriately trimmed citations would steer his imagination in one direction. But these tiny details build up a picture which does not necessarily match what the sources say" (Domański 48). I wish to ensure Domański and the readers that the only reason I trimmed that quotation was that in that passage I was describing the living conditions of Jews hiding in forests. I did not

intend to conceal the Polish plight as Domański insinuates. I read Domański's conclusion with complete surprise. That did not occur to me and, besides, why would I do so? As proof, allow me to quote the following except from my study (Engelking, vol. 1, 319): "The everyday ups and downs of survival of a large majority of the Jews included poverty and living conditions typical of a poor Polish village. The vast majority of helpers and rescuers were common, uneducated people left to their own devices; their houses were often old, wooden, single-room cottages with a thatched roof and a clay floor. It was impossible to hide anyone in such conditions." Elsewhere, while discussing the aid provided to Tema Wajnszток by Aniela Chmiel and her daughter Janka, I write that "Tema shared the two women's constant hunger, cold, and fear" (Engelking, vol. 1, 323)." Another sentence — "Her testimony talks about a 'partisan' attack and a brutal rape [...]" — was also met with the reviewer's critique because in his opinion: "when reporting on facts dutifully the author should inform the reader that this is a description of both a Jewish and Polish experience. For the rape victim during the attack was not Tema but the Polish girl" (49). I wish to explain that I did not specify the identity of the rape victim deliberately and intentionally as I regard this kind of information as 'sensitive', and I am not sure whether there are any living descendants of Janina Chmiel. Unfortunately, the reviewer did not take this into account, and pointed his finger at the victim. In the previous sentence, I explicitly wrote that the fate and living conditions of the Jewish girl were as bad as that of her Polish helpers'. Let me remark here that the 'partisan' attack on Aniela Chmiel's cottage was not aimed at robbery, since there was nothing to take from her house. It was conducted in search of the Jewish girl, but luckily the attackers did not find her.

Even though the other authors have discussed it at length, let me once again address the matter which the reviewer regards as 'fundamental,' that is, the selection of the territories we researched, some of which were not counties as understood in terms of the pre-war administrative units, meaning they did not cover the entire area of the pre-war counties. In fact, that was of *secondary* importance to our research and the methodology we adopted, though I personally believe that the best choice is always an administrative unit that existed during the period one is carrying out research on. Our objective was to trace the fate of the largest number of Jews on a given territory (each one described and characterized in detail) as possible, particularly during the hiding period, and trace the fate of people from those terrains. Our intention was to describe the key processes and phenomena, and to present them in a numerical form, which we did by providing data in various categories regarding the circumstances of survival and death throughout the hiding period. Consequently, the final conclusions were not affected by whether the researched territory was smaller or larger, or whether it was a pre-war county or a wartime Kreishauptmannschaft. Our individual selections of territory were dictated by various considerations, for instance, the surviving source base or the feasibility of a search query. The selection of the counties which we researched was neither optimal, exhaustive nor representative of the whole of Polish territory under the occupation. However, we did initiate very important research which must be continued!

As for the term 'German-Polish administration' used in the introduction (Engelking, vol. 1, 19), it is evident to a reader who does not interpret everything as a manifestation

of the authors' and editors' ill will that this term applies to the local administrative structures that were generally staffed with Poles, often the same individuals as before the war - staffing all positions with Germans from the Reich would have been impossible. The editors used this shortcut to indicate the Polish clerks' presence in the German administration, and there is nothing outrageous or misleading about this expression. On the contrary, it is wrong to think that Polish clerks had absolutely no freedom of action — its degree varied, but it did exist. The key word to understand the degree of their responsibility is 'zealousness.' In the post-war criminal trials under the 'August decree' the accused were sentenced for the crimes they committed during the occupation; the sentences were not passed for holding a certain position (as long as it was not in an organization deemed criminal), but for their zeal in the performance of duties for the benefit of the German occupier, which had had negative consequences. Establishing the degree of responsibility of Poles who worked in the administration during the occupation should be an object of historical research and reflection, as our knowledge of that area remains insufficient. The same applies to the reviewer's subsequent enunciations about the Polish Police, known as the 'blue police' (Domański 10–12), as its subordination to the German police structures is undoubted. Domański is most certainly aware of this, although he refuses to admit it. Instead, he formulates artificial accusations against our purported suggestion that this formation was autonomous, and gives those accusations great weight by elaborating on this topic over many pages.

It is also untrue that "the reader will not find out from *Night Without an End* about [...] Polish victims because these matters lay beyond the authors' interest" (11). In fact, these issues lie well within the scope of my interest, and while reading the sources I was perfectly aware of the scope of terror and the great number of victims on the Polish side. However, I could not describe those in more detail as this is a topic for a different study, which I regard as very much needed, despite the large number of existing publications (see the bibliography of *Night Without an End*). I would like to use this occasion to quote a fragment of my own text: "the amount of suffering, material and non-material losses, and human tragedy was great. Suffice it to say that nearly 40,000 people from 89 villages were deported from Biłgoraj county alone, some villages were pacified several times, others were completely destroyed, and the local population was murdered in retaliation for helping the partisans. This is what happened in, for example, Sochy and Szarajówka [...]" (Engelking, vol. 1, 354). This is only a fraction of what I wrote on this topic, but it nevertheless proves that, while accusing us of imprecisely or selectively citing in an aim to purportedly manipulate the readers, the reviewer selects citations from our study in such a way so as to prove that his critique is justified. Let me emphasize that I see a great need to carry out research on everyday life under the occupation and the fates of Jews and Poles in all of their mutual complexity and interdependency, both good and bad; that is, just as they were.

The reviewer reckons that our search query is only seemingly complete because we did not use all of the sources (Domański 27). Such a critique, however, can be made of virtually all historical studies, for using every source is never possible or sometimes even unnecessary. Domański criticizes me for failing to analyze a "series of sources from the

State Archive in Lublin” (28), but he does not specify which materials he is referring to. I know the collection of the Lublin archive well enough to assert that I did access the most important sources. I also used a relatively wide range of reference books. If the reviewer knows archival sources important for my study which I omitted, I would expect him to indicate them to me.

To sum up this short riposte, I wish to take note of the rhetorical device used by the reviewer, which consists of bringing up a few facts and examples of varied gravity (and often also falsified, as the responses written by me and my colleagues prove) and formulating severe, sweeping accusations on their basis. Domański’s text seems as though it is less of a reliable review, than it is the fulfillment of a task to discredit our entire study.