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Intimate Violence: Anti-Jewish Pogroms on the Eve of the Holocaust

Abstract: Why do pogroms occur in some localities and not in others? This paper examines a particularly brutal wave of violence that occurred across hundreds of predominantly Polish and Ukrainian communities in the aftermath of the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union. While some communities erupted in anti-Jewish violence, most others remained quiescent. In fact, fewer than 10 percent of communities saw pogroms in 1941, and most ordinary gentiles never attacked Jews. Based on an original data set of thousands of communities in the Eastern borderlands, the paper locates the roots of violence in efforts to maintain Polish and Ukrainian dominance rather than in anti-Semitic hatred or revenge for communism. In doing so, it cuts through painful debates about relative victimhood that are driven more by metaphysical beliefs in Jewish culpability than empirical evidence of perpetrators and victims. In doing so, the paper sheds new light on the political sources of mass ethnic violence.
