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“COMPETING OCCUPIERS”: BLOODY CONFLICTS BETWEEN SOVIET AND POLISH AUTHORITIES IN THE BORDERLANDS OF POST-WAR GERMANY AND POLAND, 1945-46*  

“All Poles need to take up arms and fight against the Russian locusts, who are not liberating us, but stealing every last bit of our property.”1  

Such “battle cries” rang out at village assemblies across Poland during the spring of 1945, as many Poles struggled to come to terms with the paradoxical realities that Soviet liberation from German rule brought them. The Red Army expelled the German occupiers who had wrought unprecedented tortures and humiliations on the Poles during the Second World War, yet it did so at a price. Some Red Army soldiers rampaged across the Polish countryside during March and April 1945, raping Polish women and looting Polish stores at will, despite the efforts of Red Army commanders to maintain military discipline in their ranks.2 Similarly devastating to the Poles were the “official” Soviet policies pursued in the western parts of the country, such as the wholesale removal of Polish industrial plants and machinery as reparations, which heightened fears of massive post-war unemployment and economic collapse. Perhaps the most difficult aspect of Soviet behaviour for many Poles to come to terms with, however, was the Red Army’s tendency to protect ethnic Germans from attacks by Polish slave labourers and POWs recently liberated from German bondage. This was true especially in the borderland areas between the Soviet occupation zone in Germany and the new post-war Polish state.

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* Many thanks to Professor Stephen G. Wheatcroft for his assistance with this article.
1 The above quote was recorded by a Soviet informant who attended a village assembly in a regional area of Poznan in March 1945. The relevant Soviet report also provides examples of similar anti-Soviet attitudes openly expressed in other areas of Poland. The State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF) F. R-7317. Op. 9. D. 30. L. 35.
2 Soviet officers on the First Belorussian Front, the Soviet army group which invaded Germany via Poland, complained bitterly of the low discipline within the ranks of the rear divisions in comparison with the frontline divisions that did most of the fighting. They were particularly annoyed with men of the “trophy battalions”, those rear military detachments that were established to remove military trophies from countries occupied by Soviet forces. The most virulent of their complaints are found in the above cited report, L. 31.
that were administered largely by Polish authorities, yet still occupied by Soviet forces during 1945 and 1946.3

Recent works by Norman Naimark, Philipp Ther and Ana Siljak tracing the expulsion of ethnic German refugees from Poland have noted the Soviets' tendency to protect Germans from attack in the borderlands, yet little attention has been paid to the various factors that account for this behaviour.4 It is exactly here that the gap in the literature yawns. Why did the Soviet military bother to protect Germans from Polish attacks in the borderlands when it was generally unwilling to do so in the Soviet zone? How did other Soviet occupation organs react to the violence problem, and what consequences did Soviet actions against Poles have for their relations with Polish authorities? In addressing these questions the article sheds some light on the complexities of violence between Soviets, Germans and Poles during the aftermath of the Second World War that complicates popular post-war narratives. As importantly, it demonstrates how the conduct of liberated Poles, Polish soldiers and especially the Polish authorities challenged the legitimacy and power of the Soviets and influenced the development of Soviet occupation governance during 1945 and 1946. In this sense, understanding the "Polish challenge" is essential to arriving at a different, more accurate understanding of violence and broader

3 At the Potsdam Conference the major powers agreed that the Oder-Neisse line would form the new provisional border between Germany and Poland. Poland was thus awarded a large swathe of eastern Germany consisting of approximately 21,600 square kilometres. Although the Soviets gradually handed over administrative authority of the territory to the emerging Polish government, they still maintained a presence there throughout 1945 and for much of 1946 and retained control over some aspects of governance. The article refers to this territory as the "borderlands". For a broader discussion of the Oder-Neisse division, see D. J. Allen, The Oder-Neisse Line: The United States, Poland, and Germany in the Cold War, vol. 103, Contributions to the Study of World History (Westport, Conn.: Praeger 2003).

occupation dynamics in post-war Germany and the borderlands evident in the sources, yet absent in the literature.

Central to this understanding is the concept of "jurisdictional tension". Soviet occupation organs operating in the Soviet zone were assigned contradictory aims and often competed with one another for the jurisdictional authority and resources to pursue them. In the absence of an effective executive body that could regulate disputes between the organs, mounting tensions were inevitable. Of primary concern to the Soviet Military Administration in Germany (SVAG), the chief organ charged with running the zone and implementing Soviet occupation policies, was the indiscipline in the ranks of Red Army forces situated therein, which were re-organised after the war into the Group of Soviet Occupation Forces in Germany (GSOVG). Many GSOVG officers maintained a predominantly apathetic attitude toward their troops' violent behaviour toward the occupied population, and the officers' unwillingness to discipline offending soldiers to any significant degree during mid-to-late 1945 significantly complicated SVAG's tasks in the zone. Many SVAG officers thus felt they had little choice but to try and protect locals from attacks by GSOVG troops themselves, largely by arresting suspect troops and complaining about GSOVG conduct to superior authorities. Many GSOVG officers felt that such SVAG behaviour represented a clear encroachment upon their authority that needed to be guarded against at all costs. In this sense, control over the occupied population, or indeed the capacity to protect or attack it, became a signifier of jurisdictional control in an enduring conflict.

The violent conduct of Polish civilians and military forces toward Germans, their tendency to plunder Soviet supplies and reparations loads, and the tolerant attitude of the Polish authorities toward this conduct, significantly altered the dynamics of the conflict between SVAG and GSOVG. Sensing an encroachment on its jurisdictional authority by the "wild" Poles who failed to heed the warnings given to them, GSOVG too began to operate much like SVAG and took measures to protect the occupied population in those areas heavily beset by "Polish violence", especially in the borderlands. Establishing law and order in these areas and protecting German locals from Polish violence now became a matter of jurisdictional concern for GSOVG as well as SVAG.

Jurisdictional disputes were at the heart of Soviet-Polish conflicts in the borderlands, and were compounded within a context of sheer chaos in the immediate post-war period that restrained both parties from establishing
more effective working relations with each other. One of the symptoms of this failure was the repatriate problem during mid-to-late 1945. The Soviets faced significant challenges in dealing with millions of Soviet, Polish and other European citizens who found themselves in the zone at war’s end, many after years in German bondage as slave labourers or POWs. Yet as difficult as the identification, detainment, and repatriation of Soviet citizens became, Polish repatriates in the zone presented a far more unique problem to the Soviets. Given their limited resources, Polish authorities administering the borderland areas were incapable and to some extent unwilling to establish effective border controls in the aftermath of the war. As a result, Poles were able to cross back and forth over the “fluid” border between the zone and the Polish administered borderland territories without much trouble throughout 1945 and for much of 1946; even those who had been repatriated from the zone by force. Unlike Soviet repatriates who could be safely sent back to the USSR once identified and detained, the Poles thus possessed a transient quality that significantly inhibited similar attempts to deal with them. The chaotic circumstances in the immediate aftermath of the war as well as pressing material shortages gave greater incentive to many Poles to seek out food and materials across the border.

The failure of Polish authorities to work together with the Soviets to establish better border controls and regulate the transmission of border traffic exacerbated a litany of administrative problems for the Soviets. Particularly during mid-to-late 1945 Poles regularly crossed the border into the zone to strip German locals not only of food but also agricultural goods and machinery, which SVAG officers relied upon to maintain the food rationing system. The problem reached a climax in the border city of Görlitz (Saxony) during September 1945, particularly with regard to the theft of horses and livestock. Unsanctioned forcible requisitions contributed so greatly to the food shortage problem in the area because the Soviets themselves were already dispatching a large amount of farm

5 The problems were compounded by the fact that many Soviet repatriates refused to return home for fear of prosecution, which was well grounded. Once in the USSR many repatriates faced a “filtration” process, why they would be interrogated by the security services and in some cases punished under a range of different crimes such as “collaboration with the enemy” etc. Pavel Polian’s study is a most instructive work on the topic. П. М. Полиан, Жертвы двух диктатур: Остарбайтеры и военнопленные в Третьем рейсе и их репатриация (Москва: Ваш выбор ЦИРЗ, 1996). For a broader study of refugee movements, see M. J. Proudfoot, European Refugees, 1939-52: A Study in Forced Population Movement. (London: Faber, 1957).

equipment and livestock to the USSR as reparations. It was difficult enough for SVAG officers in Görlitz to try and maintain the tenuous balance between reparations requirements and basic living standards when they lacked any control over the Soviet reparations teams operating in the area without having to deal with the Poles.\footnote{The tension between SVAG and dismantling organs such as the Special Committee (Особый Комитет) has long been a major point of interest for historians of the occupation. SVAG could do little to stop the Special Committee’s activities, or those of the other dismantling groups that rampaged across Germany throughout 1945 and for much of 1946. The thousands of Special Committee representatives operating throughout the zone were responsible to the commissariats who employed them, not to SVAG. They fulfilled reparations orders from their own commissariats and paid little attention to the clear consequences that emerged from their behaviour. The recent work of SVAG officers who dealt with the Special Committee and other organs perhaps sheds most light on these inter-organ conflicts. К. И. Коваль, “Записки уполномоченного ГКО на территории Германии,” Новая и Новейшая История 3 (1994), ———, "Работа в Германии по заданию ГКО," Новая и Новейшая История 2 (1995). М. И. Семиряга, Как мы управляли Германией: Политика и жизнь (Москва: РОССПЭН, 1995).}

Cross-border robbery was but one aspect of faltering Soviet-Polish working relations that further strained the food rationing system; refugees were another. The fervent and disorganised dispatch of emaciated and penniless ethnic German refugees across the border into the zone only further exacerbated material shortages as well as disease. The endless complaints made by SVAG officers against Polish authorities indicate the extent to which this problem affected SVAG’s ability to properly administer the zone. In an October 1945 report the deputy head of Soviet Military Administration Mecklenburg (SVAM), General M. A. Skosyrev, recounted an all too familiar case of a German refugee echelon arriving in Mecklenburg without any supervision.\footnote{Although SVAG headquarters were situated in Berlin (Karlshorst), each of the five major Lands and Provinces in Germany (Mecklenburg and Western Pomerania, Saxony, Brandenburg, Thuringia and Saxony-Anhalt) were administered by a regional military administration, i.e. the Soviet Military Administration Mecklenburg (SVAM). Skosyrev’s official title was the deputy to the head of SVAM on civilian affairs and the head of the Administration of the Soviet Military Administration Province Mecklenburg and Western Pomerania (USVAM), the operative body in charge of the day-to-day running of the Province. The same pattern of command applied to other Land and Provinces in the zone.}

The whereabouts of the Polish guards who were supposed to have led the echelon into the zone was unknown at the time, but one thing that was certain was that they had robbed the refugees of all their worldly possessions before abandoning...
Moreover, the guards had not left the refugees with any food or water for the long walk across the border. As a result, Skosyrev was left to deal with over two thousand emaciated, lice-ridden refugees who were completely unfit for the agricultural labour to which they had already been assigned (thirty-four had died en route). Instead of alleviating agricultural labour shortages in Mecklenburg, the refugees, and the other thousands like them that arrived into the zone in a similar state, thus increased the strain on the food rationing and medical systems. In response, Skosyrev could only plead with his superiors to compel Polish authorities to better regulate the dispatch of ethnic German refugees across the border.  

Ther and other historians of the period have noted how the lack of communication between Soviet and Polish authorities regarding echelon arrivals increased the strain on food and medical systems in the zone. Little attention has been paid, however, to how the arrivals actually stressed internal fractures within SVAG. SVAG exercised control throughout the zone via the hundreds of komendaturas that were strategically located

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9 Whatever refugees could keep from the Polish guards was usually taken from them at the border. Polish military forces set up checkpoints at various border crossings and regularly stripped refugees of their meagre possessions before entering the zone. Border robberies were especially problematic in mid-1945. GARF F. R.-7317. Op. 7. D. 16. L. 3.

10 Expulsions of ethnic German refugees from Poland into Germany from May to July 1945 were especially severe, as they were largely conducted by Polish military forces. Conditions improved for refugees somewhat from August 1945 after the expulsions were formalised and given a legal basis by the Potsdam Agreement (Article XIII). However, even by October the Soviets were still extremely unhappy with the manner in which Polish authorities dispatched refugees over the border. Skosyrev's complaint, and many others like it from both Soviet and Polish administrators, seems to have had some effect by late 1945 as the Polish Ministry of Public Administration ordered all of its subordinate authorities to use more humane methods of expulsion. Yet the effect of the order was limited. It was only during 1946 that expulsion conditions dramatically improved for refugees. B. Linek, "'De-Germanization' and 'Re-Polonization' in Upper Silesia, 1945-1950," in Redrawing Nations: Ethnic Cleansing in East-Central Europe, 1944-1948, ed. A. Siljak and P. Ther, Harvard Cold War Studies Book Series (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 127.

across it. Each komendatura was responsible for governing a set geographical area and was run by a komendant, small staff and military force. Refugee echelons arrived at border collection points that were situated within one komendatura or another, and most of them simply lacked sufficient resources and manpower to deal with the scale of refugee traffic. For instance, 142,854 refugees entered Mecklenburg from 1 November to 20 December 1945. Given their inability to house and feed large numbers of refugees, border komendaturas in Mecklenburg hastily directed refugees by rail to komendaturas further west without checking if the other komendaturas had signalled their readiness to accept them. As a result, in some cases overcrowded komendaturas experiencing food rationing problems received refugee trains, whilst those in need of refugee labour did not. The disproportionate allocation of refugees thus further strained housing, food rationing, and medical services exactly in those areas where they were least developed.

Cross border robbery, repatriate violence and refugees all significantly inhibited SVAG’s ability to better administer the zone. But the Poles were only part of a broader Soviet problem. Whatever the Poles stole from German farmers or refugees paled in comparison to the wholesale removal of German farm equipment by Soviet dismantling organs operating in the zone. Despite SVAG protests, dismantling organs removed as much as they could from the zone to compensate war damages wrought on the USSR by the German war machine and left SVAG to organise harvest collections and spring sowing without adequate horse and machine power. And however widespread Polish repatriate violence was against Germans; it too was only part of a broader troop violence problem. In fact, dismantling and troop violence became the primary complaints levelled by the occupied population against the Soviet occupier.

12 During the closing stages of the war Soviet military detachments set up their own komendaturas, or areas of military administration. The hundreds of komendaturas strewn across eastern Germany provided essential services to the occupied population living within their designated boundaries and carried out Soviet policy directives. On 23 July 1945 control over the body governing all komendaturas in the zone passed from GSOVG to SVAG as part of the broader transfer of jurisdictional responsibility to SVAG after the war.

13 This problem is highlighted in a December 1945 report regarding the resettlement of German refugees in Mecklenburg. В. В. Захаров, ed., Действительность Советских военных комендатур по ликвидации последствий войны и организации мирной жизни в Советской зоне оккупации Германии. 1945-1949: Сборник документов (Москва: РОССПЭН, 2005), 202.
For those SVAG officers heavily involved in the political reconstruction of the zone, dismantling and troop violence significantly inhibited their ability to garner support for the Soviet sponsored political parties, the German Communist Party (KPD), and after April 1946, the Socialist Unity Party (SED).\textsuperscript{14} Despite the positive attitudes that emerged due to the willingness of the Soviets to protect Germans from attacking Poles in the borderlands, opposition parties, anti-Soviet propagandists and most Germans across the zone still expounded the narrative of "barbarous" Russians and their German communist "lackeys", who attacked "innocent" Germans and "stole" their factories. An administrative worker in Mecklenburg echoed this narrative of "anti-communist racism" during late 1945 in conversation with his fellow townsmen, and unbeknownst to him, with an NKVD informant:

The Russians in union with the German communists are the foulest of people – the Russian only destroy and burn things. I have never met people of such a low cultural level as the Russians.\textsuperscript{15}

Whatever leverage the Soviets had to explain away troop violence as a necessary evil of military operations was lost as the problem continued into the post-war period. An August 1945 SVAG report from Saxony highlights the problem well:

Every single outrage committed by our forces, which still have not ceased, are being industriously used in propaganda against us and disseminated among the population.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{14} By late 1945 it became clear that some sort of unification of the KPD and German Social-Democratic Party (SPD) was necessary if the Soviets were to create a more popular political party that was capable of implementing SVAG policy directives and winning an election. Despite lacking unilateral support from lower and upper echelons of both the SPD and KPD, the parties were unified in April 1946 (bar the SPD Berlin branch) and formed the SED. The head of the SVAG Propaganda Administration, Colonel S. I. Tiul'panov, reflected on the issue of unification in September 1946 with members of the Central Committee of the CPSU (b). A stenographic record of their conversation on this point can be found in Бонвеч, Г. Бордяков, и Н. Неймарк, eds., Советская Военная Администрация в Германии (СВАГ). Управление пропаганды (информации) и С. И. Тюльпанов. 1945-1949 гг.: Сборник документов (Москва: 2006), 208.


Given the numerous administrative and political concerns that beset SVAG, it is unsurprising that SVAG officers went to great lengths to protect local inhabitants from attacks by GSOVG men and Poles across the zone. For SVAG, dealing with the “Polish challenge” was but one aspect of the broader war it waged for jurisdictional authority and post-war reconstruction in Germany.

The reasons why some GSOVG officers acted in a similar manner are not so apparent. Unlike their SVAG counterparts, GSOVG officers were not responsible for feeding locals, maintaining law and order or reconstructing Germans civil and political structures in the zone. Moreover, they often displayed an utter disregard for how their behaviour inhibited SVAG from fulfilling these responsibilities. Many GSOVG commanders across the zone summarily dismissed SVAG complaints regarding the indiscipline of their troops and often refused to punish their men who behaved violently toward the occupied population, especially during mid-to-late 1945.

SVAG and GSOVG disputes over such issues arose fundamentally from a lack of clarity between their respective command responsibilities. GSOVG military detachments were under the direct authority of their own commanders, rather than komendants. This was constantly problematic because GSOVG military detachments were either positioned in or frequently passed through one komendatura or another. As such, it became increasingly difficult for komendants to deal with the large number of troops located or passing though their komendaturas without establishing an operative relationship with the military commander in question. It is clear that the formation of such a relationship usually proved difficult. The central issue between SVAG and GSOVG was thus who had the right to deal with violent soldiers; their own military commanders or the SVAG officers in control of the area which they inhabited. The refusal of GSOVG commanders to react to SVAG complaints regarding the behaviour of their men arose in no small part because they refused to accept that SVAG occupied a superior jurisdictional position in the zone.

The numerous problems that the lack of clarity between SVAG and GSOVG command responsibilities gave rise to become evident from the numerous reports in which SVAG officers, tired of their inability to deal directly with GSOVG officers in their areas, requested superior authorities to intervene on their behalf. The following reports formed part of a larger “report writing war” between SVAG and GSOVG officers in areas of
Saxony and Mecklenburg who had simply come to the end of their respective tethers. Throughout July and August 1945 SVAG officers in Zwickau (Saxony) complained bitterly about the behaviour of detachments from the Eight Guards Army in the city. The reports claim that soldiers from the detachments frequently behaved violently toward locals and did not pay any attention to SVAG orders or threats to stop. The public rape of women and armed robberies were serious issues, as was the public display of violence. For instance, in the city of Plauen during late July a few drunken soldiers from a rifle battalion wildly opened fire in a public place, fatally wounding a woman. Indicting the tank army commanders for tolerating such behaviour, one report states:

During the course of the investigation officers from these detachments not only refuse to cooperate in the identification of the specific perpetrators of these acts, but on the contrary, they pursue all means in attempting to hide the criminals in order to avoid unpleasantness.17

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17 This report is filled with other examples of troop indiscipline. GARF F. R-7212. Op. 1. D. 13. L 36-38. The problematic relationship between loyalty within military units and broader questions of military discipline is one with long antecedents in Soviet military history. This was a central problem in Germany during 1945 and 1946 and in Russia during the mass demobilisations in the immediate aftermath of the Russian Civil War in 1921. In both cases the military leadership found it most difficult to force its officers to implement military discipline in their ranks. In Russia, officers were most reluctant to do so for fear that they may encourage mutiny. These fears were well grounded as the relationship between officers and men had been strained for a number of reasons, none less than the tendency of officers to assume the privileges of the former tsarist officer caste and the deplorable material conditions in the army. Fearing mutiny, many officers sought to re-establish ties of friendship with the rank and file by turning a blind eye to military indiscipline and crimes committed against civilians at a time when superior party authorities were calling for a greater crackdown on this behaviour. Officers thus established personal links of protection with their men that reinforced their command position. Many GSOVG officers did much the same in post-war Germany during 1945 and 1946, fearing that implementing harsh disciplinary orders from above would threaten their own command position and break apart the cohesiveness of their units. Zhukov attempted to address this situation in September 1945 by introducing a “collective responsibility” order that would prosecute officers for their crimes committed by their men. Stalin, however, terminated the process. For a further discussion of this point see F. Slaveski, "Violence and Xenophobia as Means of Social Control in Times of Collapse: The Soviet Occupation of Post-War Germany, 1945-1947." *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 54, no. 3 (2008): 396-97. For the Civil War experience, see M. von Hagen, *Soldiers in the Proletarian Dictatorship: The
GSOVG detachments in Mecklenburg acted in much the same manner during 1945 and 1946, which only encouraged SVAG officers to take the initiative and arrest more and more GSOVG soldiers themselves. This practice exacerbated existing tensions between the organs, which often erupted in attempted jailbreaks, inter-organ brawls and gunfights. A general of the 5th Shock Army stationed in central Mecklenburg wrote to Skosyrev as late as December 1946 to answer consistent criticisms levelled at him by the komendant of Ludwigslust over a matter of months. The general, also a Hero of the Soviet Union, cited incidents where SVAG men stripped local military officers in Mecklenburg of their shoulder epaulets and tried to arrest them without sufficient cause, encouraging him to conclude that:

There are clear cases of disciplinary trouble among the officer corps and company of the Komendant’s administration...It is obvious that the officers and the staff of the Komendant’s administration...have no desire to appreciate correct relations with military detachments. Their crudity and tactlessness often arouse animosity among the officers and soldiers of these military detachments.

Given the refusal of many GSOVG officers to punish their men for behaving violently against the occupied population, SVAG officers felt they had little choice but to arrest violent soldiers themselves. Yet these arrests, and particularly the capricious manner in which they conducted, further “politicised” the conflict over military discipline. GSOVG men could only interpret SVAG attempts to end troop violence as a thinly veiled threat to their jurisdictional authority, which needed be guarded against at all costs.

That this was a predominant attitude among GSOVG officers in the zone makes it all the more difficult to understand why GSOVG tended to


18 The failure of the literature on the occupation to explore the violent battles between SVAG and GSOVG has inhibited both an understanding of the central fissures in the structure of Soviet governance from which they emerged, and of the consequences that they engendered for relations between occupiers and occupied. The author is currently researching numerous violent episodes between the organs sparked by jurisdictional tensions to help address this problem.

protect German from attacks by Polish repatriates and soldiers. This problem must be addressed both chronologically and geographically. There is little evidence to suggest that during their advance into eastern Germany, Soviet forces habitually protected Germans from attacks by slave labourers and POWs just liberated from German bondage, Soviet or Polish. Protection was sporadic, and in any case, Soviet forces were heavily involved in attacking locals themselves. The problem of concurrent GSOVG and repatriate violence against the occupied population continued into the immediate post-war period. By July 1945 the problem had become so severe that the joint SVAG-GSOVG commander-in-chief, Marshal G. K. Zhukov, was forced to instigate massive zone-wide “clean up” operations to identify, detain and then repatriate all “unauthorised persons” from the zone, mostly Soviet POWs, recently demobilised soldiers and former “eastern workers”.

In explaining the radical step to his subordinates in August, Zhukov highlighted the negligent attitude of GSOVG and even some SVAG officers to not only their own troops’ violent behaviour, but to that of repatriates as well:

At times, our people extensively permit lawlessness, pillaging, violence, arbitrariness and the breaking of all types of law by occupation forces, repatriates and from all those who have settled in Germany. You yourselves understand that during wartime this is not so evident...but now when the war had finished, when people are beginning to forget about it...violence and brigandage is continuing.

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20 Problems between SVAG and GSOVG should have been easier to address given the integrated command structures between the organs. In addition to Zhukov’s position, the most important integrated structure was the SVAG/GSOVG Military Council. The exact nature of council, however, is unclear in the sources. In some cases the council is referred to as the GSOVG Military Council, the GSOVG Military Council by SVAG or simply the SVAG Military Council. It is clear that some council members enjoyed dual position in SVAG and GSOVG, i.e. General F. E. Bokov, General V. E. Makarov etc. It is also clear that the council tackled the most pressing policy problems on the ground in Germany and was capable of taking joint policy initiatives on pressing issues such as troop violence. The council, however, was unable to mediate the numerous local disputes between SVAG and GSOVG in a timely fashion, allowing them to spiral out of control. This was demonstrative of the fundamental “disconnect” between the GSOVG leadership and its officer corps discussed above. The lack of clarity surrounding the nature of the Council and the general lack of clarity regarding SVAG-GSOVG relations during 1945 and 1946 is discussed in a most recent archival publication. Я. Фойтцик, “Заместитель Главноначальствующего СВАГ по политическим вопросам” In Советская военная администрация в Германии, ed. А. В. Доронин, Я. Фойтцик and Т. В. Царевская-Дикина. (Москва: РОССИЯ, 2009)
It is true that this is being committed by individual criminal elements [but] this is an extremely unprofitable moment for us...Every act of lawlessness reflects badly on our mutual relations [with the Germans]...In my capacity as Supreme Commander I demand that this situation quickly cease and will not take into account any complications of this matter. If it is necessary...to shoot several tens of thousand of people, then we shall do it.21

Select GSOVG and People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD) detachments provided the manpower for the major operation launched in August, and although no mass shootings were recorded, the operation and associate measures taken by Zhukov enjoyed some success.22 Thousands of repatriates and “criminal elements” were detained during the five-day operation, which significantly contributed to the reduction in the level of violence in the zone. After the operation cases of GSOVG officers assisting German locals attacked by Polish repatriates habitually begin to appear in the sources. It is thus certainly possible to argue that GSOVG officers began to protect Germans from exterior threats once they had been enlisted to deal with the repatriate problem, especially those officers located in areas heavily beset by repatriate violence.

This new sense of responsibility may have encouraged some GSOVG officers to protect locals and property from repatriate attack. Yet it would be unwise to attribute too much importance to it. These mass operations only lasted a few days. Afterwards, GSOVG officers could not generally be held accountable for the level of repatriate violence in the area they inhabited or other problems caused by them. It was pointless for SVAG officers to attempt to do so, as it was difficult enough for SVAG to bring GSOVG officers to account for their unwillingness to discipline their own men for behaving violently toward the occupied population, let alone for repatriates. The ineffectiveness of the disciplinary structures allowing for GSOVG officers to be removed for either form of negligence was one of many factors that allowed both troop and repatriate violence to continue throughout 1945, and in a less severe form, throughout 1946. In fact, despite the impressive detention numbers achieved during the mass

22 The NKVD claimed that it had detained 2787 Polish citizens by 1 September 1945. The actual number was higher, largely because SVAG had also been involved detaining Polish repatriates. For the NKVD figures, see C. В. Мирошенько, ed., Специальные лагеря НКВД/МВД в Германии, 1945-1950 гг. (Москва: РОССПЭН, 2001), 33.
“clean up” operations, there is much evidence indicating that many GSOVG men still turned a blind eye to the behaviour of both Soviet and Polish repatriates, POWs and regular Polish army forces in most areas of the zone, and in some cases even joined them in their violent escapades against the occupied population.23

There is thus much archival evidence to support the predominating understanding of “Soviet protection” in the literature, best articulated by Naimark, who claims that “the Soviets episodically protected the Germans from the Poles, but very inconsistently”. This understanding, however, is limited by its failure to draw on those sources that demonstrate significant distinctions between GSOVG and SVAG behaviour, and perhaps as importantly, between the behaviour of GSOVG units operating in the zone and in the borderlands.24 As evident from the earlier discussion, SVAG concerns over refugees and food shortage encouraged a more comprehensive approach toward protecting locals from repatriate attacks from mid-1945 onward. Certainly some SVAG officers were less inclined toward protecting Germans than others, as Zhukov’s speech indicates, yet with the general reduction in the level of troop and repatriate violence in the zone by late 1945 and the concurrent rise in expectations of “zonal” stability, it became simply more difficult for SVAG officers to avoid offering protection to locals without receiving greater censure from their superiors.25

23 Many examples of “collusion” between GSOVG soldiers and repatriates are possible, yet perhaps one of most interesting examples is found in an August 1945 SVAG report. A group of twenty-one repatriates and soldiers operated in the northern part of Saxony throughout July and August under the command of a senior GSOVG lieutenant, looting and attacking German locals at will. The group seems to have survived the “clean up” operation launched by Zhukov, but measures were taken by local SVAG officers to disband the unit in any case. GARF F. R-7212. Op. 1. D. 137. L. 34.


25 A broad reading of reports written by SVAG komendants affords the reader this impression. Although many reports indicate an improvement of conditions across the zone, a few attract attention because they demonstrate how SVAG officers’ expectations of “stability” changed as the occupation developed. Namely, how they came to consider a relatively lower incidence of rape and murder as a cause for serious concern so quickly after the mass episodes of violence seen in the immediate aftermath of the war began to subside. From 1 to 20 October 1945, 14 rapes and 104 cases of marauding against the occupied population were recorded in Mecklenburg (approx. population 2.5 million). In response to this “insignificant amount of excesses”, to use the reporting officer’s term, he ordered that the harshest measures should be taken against GSOVG men and others responsible for these and similar acts on the basis that if “appropriate
COMPETING OCCUPIERS

It is also necessary to distinguish between GSOVG detachments operating in the zone and the borderlands during late 1945 and early 1946. It is only in the borderlands that GSOVG protected local Germans from attacking Poles to any significant degree, as it is only here that it possessed an incentive to do so. In fact, unlike the zone proper, the borderlands saw a congregation of SVAG and GSOVG policy aims, primarily, to extract resources and industrial equipment from the borderlands and send them back to the USSR as reparations. Polish authorities were understandably less than impressed with “Soviet extraction”, and did little to stop Poles from attacking Soviets supply depots and rail cargo to extract their own share of the loot. Faced with a common jurisdictional opponent, SVAG and GSOVG expectedly reacted to its challenge in a similar vein.

In charge of guarding cargo trains, rail stations, exchange points and shipping docks used to transport material and equipment extracted from the zone and the borderlands, GSOVG men were frequently attacked by armed Polish bandits. In some cases, the bandits were apprehended and identified as regular Polish soldiers, former POWs, repatriates from Germany or simply local Poles. The border city of Szczecin was the centre of this conflict during late 1945 for a number of reasons. During this period control over Szczecin was gradually being handed over to Polish authorities, leading to Soviet-Polish disputes over their respective jurisdictional responsibilities to inhabitants as well as their respective authority in the city. Szczecin also attracted more attention from Polish bandits than other cities because the Soviets used the city’s sea port to ship off reparations to the USSR. As Polish bandits regularly robbed passenger and cargo trains en route to Szczecin, gunfights between the Soviet “defenders” and Polish “attackers” became common, sometimes resulting in deaths. For instance, on 23 September 1945 a cargo train en route to

measures are not taken to address this insignificant amount of excesses, it will undermine the authority of the Red Army amongst the occupied population.” Захаров, ед., Действие Советских военных комендатур по ликвидации последствий войны и организации мирной жизни в Советской зоне оккупации Германии. 1945-1949: Сборник документов, 458-59.

26 The extent to which surviving Polish Jews participated in these attacks is difficult to determine from Soviet sources, as they tend not to distinguish between Polish and Jewish identities in their reports on Polish violence.

27 The names of former German cities and areas awarded to Poland at the Potsdam conference are referred to by their current Polish names in this article.
Szczecin from Grambow was attacked by a group of Polish repatriates and regular soldiers of the Polish army. In response:

The Red Army [GSOVG] guards escorting the train resisted [the attack], forcing the four attacking Poles to retreat with one being captured. The Pole captured by the guards was found strangled by a belt 300 metres from the Grambov [sic] rail station; his corpse abandoned. No documents allowing for the establishment of the identity of the strangled Pole were found on the corpse.28

As NKVD investigators had difficulty in locating the GSOVG guards for questioning, the exact details of the incident are difficult to trace. They nonetheless suspected the Pole was strangled by one of the GSOVG guards.

Such incidents were not uncommon in Szczecin and its surrounding areas during this period, and naturally required GSOVG guards to protect rail, sea passengers and workers at the scene of the attack. The extent of GSOVG protection during 1945 and early 1946 is perhaps most evident from an analysis of German mail confiscated by Soviet censors in Szczecin. The dominant impression gained from this analysis is that both SVAG and GSOVG men were generally considered protectors from the Polish threat (not that most Germans could tell the difference between them), and that the Soviets were often compared favourably to the “Polish barbarians”. Of the numerous mail excerpts available in GARF, the following most clearly demonstrate this point:

The Russians don’t to anything bad to us and we all live in peace.

The Poles are the rulers of the town; the Russians are still here and protect the people against Polish attacks.29

Where personal experiences could not be recounted, other letters echoed popular attitudes in the area, such as one that concluded that “the Russians are more accommodating than the Poles; they are much more humanitarian.”30

30 Ibid.
Unlike in the zone where SVAG was primarily concerned with reconstruction, in the borderlands it too was primarily concerned with extracting resources and infrastructure as quickly as possible. Although during mid-to-late 1945 SVAG gradually handed over control of these areas to Polish authorities, it still maintained control over various aspects of governance that enabled it to keep exploiting the area’s resources. Skosyrev outlined the enduring SVAG priorities in the borderlands in response to a request by the komendant of a small region just north of Szczecin to clarify his responsibilities toward German locals made as late as May 1946,

We do not provide foodstuffs to the population living in the Polish areas, and after the end of dismantling, the Germans can organise themselves however they wish. The matter is finished.31

SVAG thus expected the Polish administration to provide foodstuffs and essential services to locals, yet also expected them to stand idly by and allow Soviets reparations teams to remove as much machinery and valuable goods from the areas as possible. Although SVAG officers were especially sensitive to how the removal of such equipment in the zone reduced their ability to administer it, they expressed no similar concern as to how removals affected their Polish counterparts to do the same in the borderlands.

The Poles did not act according to Soviet expectations. Recent work by Polish historians such as Janusz Dolega, Łukasz Kulesa and Rafał Tarnogorski has traced how Soviet policies such as reparations only further strained the patience of Polish authorities in the borderlands.32 In turn, SVAG assessments of the komendaturas situated along the border such as, Gubin, Seelow and Kostrzyn indicate how the intransigent attitude of Polish authorities toward the Soviets only exacerbated the violence problem in the borderlands.33 According to the SVAG assessments,

33 Much like other cities situated along the border, Gubin was divided into German and Polish parts in 1945, the Polish part of the city being named Gubin and the German Guben. For the sake of convenience, the article uses the term Gubin to refer to both parts of the city during 1945 and 1946.
although komendatura officers had established some working relations with the Polish administration in Gubin by June 1945 they were unable to persuade them to take any sort of action against the 11th division of the Polish Army, which regularly robbed and attacked German locals and refugees, stole Soviet supplies, or those supplies in the area that the Soviets intended to remove for reparations. As alarmingly, the command staff of the division regularly took part in these actions themselves, diminishing any Soviet hopes of bypassing civilian Polish authorities and appealing directly to the staff to establish better discipline in their ranks.34

Without much assistance from the Polish authorities, SVAG officers felt they had little choice but to try and take on the robbers themselves. Yet given their light presence in the area, in many cases they relied on Soviet security agencies such as the NKVD to deal with the problem. NKVD detachments operating in Gubin intervened to stop armed robberies in progress and fought tooth and nail against Polish bandits who sought to steal cargo on its way into the zone, such as foodstuffs or machinery.35 In this sense, komendants enforced law and order in their borderlands komendaturas, or at least were happy for the NKVD to do so, because it allowed them to better exploit the area’s resources. SVAG protection of Germans from attacks by Poles by was thus as much product of their exploitative purposes in the area, as that of GSOVG.

The confluence of SVAG and GSOVG policy concerns in Szczecin and other cities in the borderlands, none less than exploiting resources, both encouraged an increase in violence and an increase in protection. Polish authorities had some claim to the resources extracted from the borderlands in view of the fact that they were expected to draw on them when providing essential services to inhabitants. Even taking into account the limited authority and reach of the Polish authorities during mid-to-late 1945 and the chaotic conditions in the borderlands that made administering them all the more difficult, it was only to be expected that Polish authorities would do little to stop Polish soldiers and others from exacting their share. And it was exactly the nature and degree of arbitrary violence meted out by the

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34 The investigation into the state of border komendaturas was conducted by Colonel S. M. Shestakov in June 1945. GARF. F. R-7317. Op. 7. D. 16. 2-4.
35 Colonel Shestakov’s report cited above indicates that the NKVD detachments operating in the rear of the Red Army had been tracking the movement of Polish bandits for weeks, and had managed to make some arrests by June 1945.
Poles that required the Soviets to extend their protection of cargo loads to human beings.

In many ways, the SVAG-GSOVG relationship in the borderlands was a microcosm of successful interaction that could simply not be reproduced in the zone. In the zone jurisdictional tension between SVAG and GSOVG inhibited them from adopting a most necessary cooperative approach toward the troop violence problem. SVAG attempts to deal with problem independently were only seen by GSOVG as an encroachment onto their authority that needed to be guarded against, if not repelled with violence. The situation was different in the borderlands. Here GSOVG attacks against locals were overshadowed by “Polish violence”, which was at least tacitly supported by Polish authorities during 1945. The borderlands also saw the entrance of a third jurisdictional combatant into the conflict between SVAG and GSOVG. The need to protect their shared jurisdictional right to exploitation bound SVAG and GSOVG together against a common Polish opponent and was the catalyst for “Soviet protection”. Jurisdictional tension was thus a double edged sword, allowing GSOVG troop violence to continue in the zone, yet at the same time encouraging GSOVG to protect Germans in the borderlands from Polish attacks. After suffering the humiliations of both Soviet and German occupation during the war, this was another bitter pill for the Poles to swallow; the taste of which remains strong after half a century.