Violence against the Jews broke out immediately with the Nazi occupation of Galicia. The summer of 1941 was marked by a wave of anti-Jewish violence across Western Ukraine – pogroms and executions in which the Wehrmacht, the SS, Ukrainian nationalists, and ordinary people took part. The wave of violence passed quickly over Galicia, and Metropolitan Andrei Sheptytsky was unable to develop an adequate response to it.

But systematic destruction of the Jews in Galicia began early in 1942 and continued until the middle of 1943. Sheptytsky responded to this forcefully in a series of letters, regulations, and admonitions to his clergy and faithful as well as to the Holy Father and even to one of the main architects of the destruction of the Jews, Heinrich Himmler.

Sheptytsky was moved to protest directly to Himmler in February 1942, after an action against the Jews in the Galician town of Rohatyn in which the Germans made use of Ukrainian auxiliary police. Sheptytsky’s statements of late March 1942 appeared during the ‘March Action’ in the Lviv ghetto. At this time about fifteen thousand Jews were rounded up and deported to death camps. It was also the first action in Lviv in which Ukrainian police were directly involved in the roundups. Sheptytsky’s impassioned letter to the pope of August 1942 followed hard on the heels of the ‘August Action’ in Lviv, in which forty thousand Jews were sent to their death, again with the active participation of the Ukrainian police. In June 1943 thousands of the last Lviv Jews were shot by German police units, which explains why the metropolitan then sent a letter to the Holy See that the murders were still continuing. From the timing of Sheptytsky’s interventions, it is clear that he turned his attention to the Holocaust as a response to the escalation of the ‘Final Solution’ in Galicia, particularly in his own city.

The letter to Himmler has been lost, but it was read by a few people who have left an account of it. One reader was Kost Pankivsky, a Ukrainian official collaborating with the German authorities. Here is his account of what it said:

Written in a reserved, diplomatic style, in elegant words, the letter was yet extraordinarily sharp in content. The metropolitan wrote that, although he did not make bold to interfere in matters which are conducted by and are the responsibility of the German state administration, as a priest he cannot not be pained by the behaviour of the German armed forces and German police with regard to the inhabitants of the land, and primarily with regard to the Jews, and by the maltreatment and execution of people without trial. Therefore he is permitting himself to call attention to this, because he does not know whether these things are actually known in Berlin. Thus, as the head of the church and the spiritual leader of his faithful, he considers it his obligation to ask that the Ukrainian police, which is composed exclusively of his faithful, not be used in actions against the Jews.
The letter was also read by Rabbi David Kahane when he was in hiding at the metropolitan’s palace and he also recalled that Sheptytsky asked Himmler to remove Ukrainian policemen from all extermination operations carried out against the Jews. Three other sources also raise the theme of the Ukrainian police’s participation in the massacres. Sheptytsky wrote in both of his letters to Pope Pius XII that he tried to prevent Ukrainian youth from joining the police or other organizations in which their souls could be exposed to danger. In his letter to Cardinal Tisserant of September 1942 he also expressed his displeasure at the Germans’ use of Ukrainian policemen for ‘perverted purposes.’ In the course of his conversation with the French collaborator René Martel, he stated that he himself had heard the confession of a young man who had killed seventy-five Jews in Lviv in a single night.

According to Rabbi Kahane, the letter to Himmler also speculated on the psychological consequences for Ukrainians involved in these murders. In the rabbi’s words: ‘The ordinary Ukrainian is crude and in the future he would likely do to his countrymen, his brethren, what he had done to the Jews. He becomes inured to murder and it would be difficult for him to unlearn it.’ The metropolitan later, in November 1942, drew a psychological portrait of such a perpetrator in his pastoral letter ‘Thou Shalt Not Kill’:

The sight of spilled blood calls forth in a person’s soul a sensual desire, bound up with cruelty, which seeks satisfaction in dealing out suffering and death to its victims. The thirst for blood can become an uncontrollable passion, which finds the greatest delight in torturing and killing people. Crime becomes a necessary daily nourishment, without which [the killer] suffers torment, as though he suffered from some sickness of thirst and hunger which must be quenched.

Earlier, in his letter to the pope of 29-31 August 1942 he had written that the executioners are now habituated to the massacre of Jews, to the murder of thousands of innocent people, to the flow of blood, and to blood lust.

A text of 27 March 1942 concerned the sin of murder, a leitmotiv of Sheptytsky's writings in the war years. He made it a sin reserved to the bishop in the Lviv archeparchy, a decision he reiterated in his pastoral letter of 21 November 1942, ‘Thou Shalt Not Kill,’ and in his ‘Rules on the Decree ‘Concerning the Fifth Commandment.’’ He mentioned the reservation as well in his letter to Pius XII of 29-31 August 1942. It may be significant that an earlier condemnation of murder, issued in connection with the factional violence in the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), did not yet include the reservation of the sin. The metropolitan felt that more severe measures were now called for. The reservation meant that parish priests did not have the authority to absolve the sin of murder in confession; only Sheptytsky could. Of course, an effect of reserving the sin of murder was that the bishop would get a much clearer picture of the extent of murder being committed by the faithful entrusted to his jurisdiction. This undoubtedly was one of the reasons that Sheptytsky reserved that particular sin.

Also in his text of 27 March 1942, Sheptytsky called upon the faithful to shun people whom they knew for certain to be murderers. Although he admitted that this was not canonically required, Sheptytsky urged his flock to show murderers ‘the disgust and disgrace they deserve’ in the hope that this would lead the offending individuals to repentance, to rid themselves of the mark of Cain. He instructed confessors to impose on murderers a penance so onerous that they would recall for the rest of their lives that they
had shed innocent human blood. In his pastoral letter ‘On Mercy,’ Sheptytsky wrote that the repetition of the crime of Cain, that is murder, ‘must call forth indignation and disgust, and these feelings should be manifested in order to lead the fallen sinner to come to his senses.’ In ‘Thou Shalt Not Kill,’ he called upon pastors and faithful to help the unfortunate sinner repent by rebuking him.

By their entire behavior, through repeated reminders, by avoiding social intercourse with them, by decisively refraining from family ties with them, let them make the murderers understand that they consider them a pestilence and danger for the village. When no one in the village will greet the criminal, and no one will allow him into their house, and no family will marry into a relationship with him, when even in church Christians will not stand next to him, when they will avoid meeting him on the road, when no one will sell him anything or buy anything from him, perhaps then he will have a change of heart and will begin a life of repentance as well as the labor of correction.

In the ‘Rules on the Decree “Concerning the Fifth Commandment”’ issued shortly after ‘Thou Shalt Not Kill,’ he also encouraged the faithful to avoid murderers in order to lead them to repentance. In his speech at the opening of the Archeeparchial Sobor of 1943, Sheptytsky returned to this theme and enriched it by reflections on how people have felt repugnance even for those official executioners who merely carried out the just laws of the land. ‘But now we find ourselves in the situation that in many villages we perhaps have people who relate how they have killed their neighbours, and we even meet those who brag that they have no greater pleasure than shedding blood. How do we convert such people and how do we restore health to their human nature?! How do we restrain that cry of spilled blood that cries to heaven for vengeance?!’

On 28 March 1942, Sheptytsky wrote a letter to Pope Pius XII about the situation in Galicia under German occupation. Although never sent, it provides further insight into what Sheptytsky was thinking at that time. He informed the Holy Father about the incredible extent of the murders, estimating that up to 130,000 Jews had been killed in Kyiv. In his letter to the pope of 29-31 August 1942 he was able to provide more exact information about the Holocaust in Ukraine. He said that the Jews were the Germans’ primary victims. Over two hundred thousand had been killed just in Galicia. There were more victims as the German army moved east. In Kyiv, he said, over thirty thousand Jews – men, women, and children – were killed in the space of a few days. Such murders have been going on for a year now. In his conversation with Martel a year later, he also provided information on the extent of the Holocaust, estimating that a hundred thousand Jews had been killed in Lviv alone and millions across Ukraine.

The Holocaust was obviously very much on Sheptytsky’s mind in mid-April 1942. In ‘Mary – Mother,’ he wrote of how wartime has brought many misfortunes on the people, including hunger and disease. ‘But the most terrible of all these plagues,’ he said, ‘is the plague of crimes voluntarily committed by our people.’ We stand before God’s altar ‘with shame and a sense of our own guilt.’ A particularly difficult burden for him was consciousness of the ‘crimes committed by our faithful.’ ‘Among our children,’ he wrote, ‘there have been found people who are so foolish and conscienceless that they summon upon the whole nation even heavier divine punishments.’ Only the Most Holy Mother of God can help stay God’s anger and intercede on behalf of ‘those whose hands are stained with blood’ that they be granted ‘mercy and the grace of repentance.’ In ‘On
Mercy,’ Sheptytsky wrote of children who had once been a source of pride for their parents, but who had now become ‘a heavy cross and a painful source of shame.’ ‘What a pain for a father to see his son, stained with shedding innocent blood, a son from whom all the neighbours and acquaintances turn away in disgust.’

In his pastoral letter ‘The Episcopal Jubilee of the Pope,’ he stressed the importance of love of neighbour, ‘all neighbours, all people.’ The Christian cannot treat neighbours like Cain treated his brother. ‘Christ teaches us to embrace with love all of humanity, including our enemies and those who injured or injure us.’ This love must be ‘like the love of Christ – to the point of giving up our life for them, of shedding our blood.’ It is difficult not to interpret these words as an encouragement to offer shelter to the persecuted Jewish people in spite of the capital punishment that could result from such an act. This theme found expansion in Sheptytsky’s pastoral letter ‘On Mercy’ of June 1942. ‘All the books of the Old and New Testament tell us about God’s mercy towards all of humanity and for individual people.’ Every Christian, he wrote, had the obligation to show mercy. Love of neighbour should encompass ‘all neighbours.’ The following passage clearly refers to the situation of Jews seeking food and shelter from Christians, which was becoming a widespread phenomenon after the liquidation actions began:

The obligation for almsgiving grows with the need of one’s neighbour. When this need grows to the extreme, when it’s a matter of the life of the neighbour, the Christian is obliged to help him, and not only out of that which is necessary for him to preserve his wellbeing relative to his position. At that time the obligation of love becomes an important obligation, that is, an obligation conditioned by grave sin and the obligation of justice. Whoever finds himself in extreme trouble has a right to seek rescue even from someone else’s property, even without the permission of the owner. He reminded the faithful that the highest level of love is to lay down one’s life for another. There are times, Sheptytsky said, when Christians absolutely must carry this out in its literal sense. But all love of neighbour should incorporate that readiness for self-sacrifice.

The Christian’s love of neighbour stands in great contrast to ‘that true abyss of evil and hatred which is the crime of murder!’ Murder is the repetition of the crime of Cain, ‘because every neighbour is a brother – is a member of that same human family which grew out of the family of the first man.’ Murder is the crime that most distances a person from the Christian love of neighbour and from the Christian conception of life. Murder is the greatest crime, the greatest contradiction of human nature, because death is the greatest evil one human being can inflict upon another. Murder calls for punishment from heaven.

In his August letter to the pope Sheptytsky wrote that the Nazis were worse than the Bolsheviks, that their regime was almost diabolical. (He later also told Martel that ‘Germany is worse than Bolshevism.’) The Germans had set up a system of lies, deceit, injustice, and pillage, a caricature of all notions of civilization and order. Their egoism had grown to absurd proportions and their national chauvinism had reached a completely insane level. They hated all that was good and beautiful. Where was all this to lead the unfortunate German people? Another point he raised was how helpless he felt in the face of such evil. He had issued pastoral letters against murder, he had made murder a
reserved sin, he had tried to discourage youth from entering the militia, and he had protested directly to Himmler. Yet, he said, this is absolutely nothing in comparison to the rising waves of moral filth engulfing the whole land. A third point reiterated how deeply disturbed he was by the moral collapse in his archeparchy: much blood must be voluntarily shed to expiate the blood shed in the course of these crimes.

Soon after issuing his pastoral letter ‘Thou Shalt Not Kill’, Sheptytsky issued his ‘Rules on the Decree “Concerning the Fifth Commandment”’. This gave guidelines on how to deal with the ‘numerous facts of murder which our faithful have committed.’ He recommended missions and recollections as well as preaching against murder. ‘Only the work in solidarity of the entire community can save it from the misfortune of living with criminals.’ He followed up with a letter to the clergy, ‘Peace in the Lord and Blessing,’ which stated that these rules he proposed seemed to him to be ‘simply nothing in comparison to that which should be proposed.’

In summary, early in 1942 Sheptytsky began to sharply protest the Germans’ murder of the Jews, protesting directly to the Germans as well as to the highest officials of the Catholic church. He was particularly concerned about how Ukrainians were being drawn into the destruction process. He came to the conclusion by the summer of 1942 that the Nazis were even worse than the Bolsheviks. He was deeply appalled by murder and feared mightily for the salvation of the flock under his care.

As the murder of the Jews progressed, his thinking on murder also grew more ramified. New ideas occurred to him, such as the repugnance shown even legal executioners. He assiduously gathered information on the Holocaust.

Among the most frightening things that students of the Holocaust have to confront in their research are the readiness of so many ordinary people to commit monstrous crimes against their fellow human beings as well as the indifference to and even acceptance of this on the part of so many bystanders. It is all too rare to find in the Gentile population expressions of such desperate horror at the murder of the Jews as we find in the texts that Sheptytsky produced. Too rarely do we encounter individuals who were doing everything in their power to protest against and stop the orgy of murder. Sheptytsky was a man, and he had his failings and prejudices like all men, but he was a man with a strong conscience, principles, and moral courage.