Chapter Seven: The Holocaust in the East

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The Nazi attacks on Eastern European areas were horrific. Many students are not aware of the events that took place in Rumbala. On November 30 and December 8, 1941, a total 26,000 people were murdered in the outskirts of Riga. Of these 25,000 were Latvian citizens and about 1,000 were brought in from the Third Reich. Please (WARNING: graphic textual descriptions) read: Remembering Rumbula

As Adam Yunis illustrates in his critical essay, accounts and studies from the East were obstructed by the emergent Cold War. Eastern survivors that I have spoken with bolster the conclusions that Yunis draws in that the designation of a survivor for those in the East was complicated and varied from their western counterparts.

The Memory of the Holocaust on the Nazi Occupied Territory of the Former Soviet Union

Adam Yunis

The Nazi Holocaust in the East was one of the most destructive events in history and the memory of this time continues to impact Soviet survivors and global politics. The pace of memory and remembrance was impacted greatly by post war social and political conditions, creating a silence that was not present in Central and Western Europe. The lack of access to Soviet records, the fall of the Soviet Union and a wave of Jewish immigrants in the 1980s and 1990s to the U.S. all contributed to a greater recognition of the Holocaust by Bullets in the East. Many Soviet Holocaust survivors did not consider themselves survivors, and the USSR generally did not recognize the separate experience of Jews due to a focus on the uniform suffering of the Soviet people. The lack of research into the details of Nazi operations in the USSR has been confronted by several groups that seek to shed light on places of mass murder. This essay will discuss the memory of the Holocaust in the former Soviet Union and recent efforts to both recognize Jewish suffering during the war and research sites of mass killing.

The memory of the Holocaust in the former Soviet Union has developed at a slower pace than in Central and Western Europe due to several factors to be discussed. During the existence of the Soviet Union, Soviet authorities cultivated their own interpretation of historical memory which aimed to dismiss existing ethnic tension, conceal the effects of the Soviet invasion of Eastern Europe in 1939, and sought to replace the memories of individuals and communities with the narrative of the new imagined community-the Soviet people. The fall of the Soviet Union, a wave of Jewish immigration to the United States and Israel, and significant increase in

research into the Holocaust in the FSU (Former Soviet Union) all contributed to a greater understanding of the Holocaust by Bullets and recognition of Soviet survivors. This essay will discuss the memory of the Holocaust on the Nazi occupied territory of the former Soviet Union and recent efforts to both document and recognize the Soviet Jewish experience.

Memory of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union, 1945-1991

While decades of silences would follow, immediate wartime and post-war research was done to compile experiences of Soviet Jewry under Nazism. Chief among this was the work done by Soviet Jewish novelist Ilya Ehrenburg and Soviet Jewish war correspondent Vasilij Grossman. Grossman interviewed Jewish survivors as well as non-Jewish wartime residents about the fate of Soviet Jews and documented the liberation of Treblinka and Majdanek, publishing some of the first accounts of Nazi killing centers. The material intended to form *The Black Book: The Ruthless Murder of Jews by German-Fascist Invaders Throughout the Temporarily Occupied Regions of the Soviet Union and in the Death Camps of Poland during the War 1941-1945*, to be published in 1946 in Russian and Yiddish.

The correspondence between Grossman and Ehrenburg is telling, as it predicts future Soviet treatment of the Holocaust. Grossman observed that the word 'Jews' was used too frequently and suggested to avoid repetition of this word in order not to irritate the reader and to substitute it with general terms like 'people or 'civilians'' (Baranova, 2015). On October 7th, 1947, the decision was made by Department for Propaganda of the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist party that since the book "contains grave political errors", it "may not be published." All copies were sent to storage warehouses where they were destroyed in 1948 (Baranova, 2015). Thus, because it singled out Jewish suffering and because it questioned the image of friendship of peoples in Soviet society, the major and probably the only post-war work

that treated the Holocaust in the Soviet Union as a separate Jewish phenomenon was never published in the USSR. Copies survived and were later published in Yiddish, English and eventually in Russian after the fall of the Soviet Union.

The immediate post war Stalinist censorship also prevented the publishing of works of Soviet Jewish photographers who were on the front lines documenting the Nazi Holocaust with the Soviet Army. Professor of Jewish History at the University of Colorado, David Shneer, has recently written *Through Soviet Jewish Eyes* (2010), which published for the first time many photographs taken by an elite group of two dozen Soviet-Jewish photographers who were charged by the Stalinist state to document the Holocaust and other crimes against Soviet citizens. An important work in the study of Soviet Jewry, it removes Jews and their relationship to the Soviet Union from a lens of repression and silence, and instead shows Soviet Jewish agency in their own struggle and in their contributions to building the Soviet Union and documenting Nazi crimes. Post-war Stalinist anti-Semitism had the effect of silencing the patriotic contributions Jews had made to the Soviet Union, and future work must continue to recognize that the Jewish struggle to document Nazi crimes was also a part of a larger patriotic contribution that Soviet Jews made during the war.

Soviet historiography in the post war decades that followed the Second World War did not treat the Holocaust as a separate, Jewish event and fate. The event was not erased from official Soviet history but adapted within the confines of the post war ideological framework. Soviet martyrdom emphasized a universal suffering and the defeat of the racist and murderous Nazism (Baranova, 2015). Discouraging any emphasis of the Jewish origin of Nazi policies became standard in Soviet history and in public commemorations.

American Jewish scholar Zvi Gitelman (1991) in his article “Politics and the Historiography of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union” claims that a survey of Soviet literature reveals that there was no uniform treatment of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union. Some works do admit and describe a Jewish tragedy, others discuss some parts, while others prefer to refrain from any national and ethnic origin of victims. Unity among all Soviet people meant not interrogating the recent past. This was the goal of Soviet policy after the Second World War. The Soviets authorities viewed any nationalist movement as a threat to its control. To create a Soviet identity, this unifying experience of suffering played a large role in creating a feeling of community among all Soviet people. Therefore, recognition of a separate experience, a Jewish tragedy, one that involved local collaboration and capitalized on native anti-Semitism, did not fit Soviet postwar interests, meaning it could not exist.

Anti-Semitism certainly played a role in Soviet treatment of the Holocaust, but not addressing how the Holocaust occurred in the western territories-Western Belarus, Western Ukraine, Lithuania, Latvia, areas briefly annexed by the Soviet Union from 1939-41, also had the practical concern of suppressing ethnic tension. The reluctance to address collaboration in accounts of Nazi massacres is reflective of Soviet acknowledgment of existing anti-Semitism among its population. Soviet authorities tried to avoid any discussion that could explain why so many people in Soviet society were so inflicted by anti-Semitism and hostile to the existing Soviet regime of ‘39-41, that they participated in Nazi massacres. By doing this, Soviet authorities suppressed the fact that the occupation of Eastern Europe and the Baltic by the Soviet Union from ‘39-41 created an enormous amount of anti-Semitism, local populations scapegoating the Jews for their problems and associating Jews with the new communist regime. For Soviet authorities it was better not to get into the details of how the Holocaust occurred in

the Soviet Union, to assign the killing of Jews to the Nazis as a part of their greater policy for Europe which involved cruelty and killings of every Soviet ethnic group.

This is not to say that there were not efforts by individuals in the Soviet Union to commemorate the Holocaust. The most famous of these efforts was the controversy over the ravine at Babi Yar. Babi Yar was a site near Kiev, where 33,771 Jews were killed in 2 days - September 29-30, and where 100,000 people would be murdered. When the war ended, no monument was placed there to commemorate this event and there were plans to turn this site into a park and a stadium.

In 1961 Soviet writer Viktor Nekrasov published the famous poem "*Бабий Яр"* [Babi Yar]. The poem spoke not only of Jews murdered in Babi Yar but of Soviet mistreatment of Jews. Famous Soviet composer Dmitry Shostakovich included the poem in his Symphony No. 13 (Lebovic, 2017). These artistic and musical pieces by Soviet intellectuals attracted world attention to the problem of Soviet remembrance of the Holocaust and revealed that Soviet society was far from free of anti-Semitism. It also importantly demonstrated that some intellectuals were uncomfortable with the lack of commemoration of Jewish suffering in the war. Finally, public pressure resulted in a memorial placed at Babi Yar, but the inscription reads: "here in 1941-1943, the German fascist invaders executed more than 100.000 citizens of Kiev and prisoners of war". Despite the fact that more than 30 percent of victims killed by the Nazis in Babi Yar were Jews, as well as the fact that over one million Ukrainian Jews were murdered in the Holocaust by the Nazis and Ukrainian militias, there was no reference to a Jewish tragedy.

The Fall of Communism

The fall of the Soviet Union brought about many changes to Holocaust research and memory in the former Soviet Union. As immigration restrictions began to loosen, there was a

large increase in Jewish immigration to the United States and Israel during the 80s and 90s. This played a crucial role in the growth of recognition of Soviet survivors. Soviet Jews who had survived the Holocaust did not find an environment in the Soviet Union that was receptive to any recognition of the tragedy of Soviet Jewry. Anti-Semitism remained a constant force for Jews in the Soviet Union in the post-war period, as religion of any kind was actively suppressed in the Soviet territories. Mentioning the Jewish roots of the tragedy of that was the Holocaust by Bullets was not advisable, and for many second-generation survivors, children who fled or hid with their parents, they grew up not knowing the details of their survival. The situation of Jews is further complicated by the fact that they were living in areas where local people took part in the killing of Soviet Jews. This created a prominent sentiment that it was best to move on and not bring up any history that could hurt their current situation. Upon immigration to the United States and Israel, there came opportunities for Jewish survivors from the USSR to finally come out and speak about their experiences.

The 1990s saw an increase in Holocaust documentation, organizations like the Shoah foundation recorded survivor testimony in the United States, this coincided with the immigration of Soviet survivors whose stories had never been fully recognized or told. Many recent Jewish immigrants to the U.S. did not view themselves as survivors, as the dominant view in the latter half of the 20th century associated a survivor with someone who had survived a Nazi concentration camp. This perception of the Holocaust and survivors was harmful as it does not account for those who hid, fled, or even fought against the Nazis. With the fall of the Soviet Union, new opportunities for researchers and historians developed to explore the Holocaust by Bullets, as Soviet archives were opened, and historians and researchers could freely work in areas of mass killing. This combination of new historical research of the Holocaust in the FSU,

and the awakening of memory by Soviet Jews with the help of American Jewish organizations allowed for greater recognition and publication of the brutality of Nazi and their collaborators' actions.

It also allowed for Soviet survivors to receive recognition for their suffering and be thought of as Holocaust survivors, their individual and familial stories of survival under the most horrible conditions documented by historical institutions and NGOs. This helped in the creation of a Soviet Jewish survivor identity for those now living abroad.

Politics of Memory

A contentious politics of memory developed in the newly created states after the fall of the USSR. With independence from the USSR came a new issue of how these states would commemorate their history. Ukrainian, Latvian, Belarusian, Estonian involvement in the Holocaust is generally not recognized by their respective governments, and public memorials of the Holocaust have created political or social problems. The question of the local population's collaboration with the Nazis remains the most problematic issue. This issue arose during the 2014-onging conflict in Eastern Ukraine, where some Ukrainian militia groups and protesters evoked Nazi imagery, tattoos and uniforms in their rebellion.

Many celebrated Stephen Bandera, founder of the OUN B, an organization that collaborated with Nazi Germany and that murdered thousands of Jews as well as perpetrated a brutal ethnic cleansing campaign against Poles in Eastern Galicia, killing between 50,000 and 100,000 (Snyder, 2003). The OUN B and Bandera's Ukrainian ultra-nationalism ideology have remained a constant force on the Ukrainian far right.

The cycle then begins of Russian propaganda claiming that there is a broad sympathy to Neo Nazism in Ukraine, which prevents Ukrainian society from addressing the Ukrainian far

right and their history, as they do not want to feed into Russian propaganda. Russian nationalism has also been on a dramatic rise, with a mythical version of Russia's history at its core. History remains a constant political issue in the states of the former Soviet Union.

On one hand, progress has evidently been made in comparison with the Soviet era and the years of Perestroika. On the other hand, public discourse often remains either hostile or uninformed about what took place. Significant progress remains in the former Soviet Union for Holocaust remembrance, as the recent war and unrest in Ukraine has shown a weaponization of history on both sides of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

Recent Research into the Holocaust by Bullets

State run organizations and NGOs emerged after the fall of the FSU that now document and research the Holocaust in the former Soviet Union. This essay will focus on the work of Father Patrick Debois. Debois was the grandson of a French soldier who had been deported the Nazi prison camp Rava-Ruska, located on the Ukrainian-Polish border (Desbois, 2008). This area has a particularly brutal war history, the Holocaust and other ethnic based killings still haunt the region. After being ordained in 1986, Debois worked with the Jewish community of France in a variety of roles facilitating relations between the Catholic and Jewish communities, eventually serving nationally as the secretary of the French conference of Bishops for Relations with the Jewish community from 1999 to 2016.

Due to his grandfather's experiences and silence about the Holocaust, Debois developed an intense interest in the Holocaust, starting from childhood. In 2002 he travelled to Ukraine to visit where his father was imprisoned and to pay his respects to the Jewish victims. Upon arrival he did not see a marking or commemoration to the victims of the Holocaust in Ukraine. Desbois knew that before World War II more than 15,000 Jews had lived in the town, but when he asked

to see where they had been murdered, the mayor brushed him off and said no one knew anything about it. "How could more than 10,000 Jews be killed in the village and nobody knows?" he says. "I knew I needed to find out what happened. So, I came back two times, three times, four times to Rawa-Ruska. And then the mayor lost the election, and a new mayor was elected, much less Soviet" (Breger, 2011). Upon returning the new mayor led Desbois to a forest, a place of mass killing, where 50 elderly men and women gathered to tell of their experiences witnessing the Holocaust.

They gave detailed testimony to the murder of the Jewish community in their city. This testimony had never been given before, and Desbois saw an opportunity for a larger scale project. Desbois realized what a wealth of information on the Holocaust was available on the Holocaust in Eastern Europe if you interviewed the last witnesses and marked sites of killing. In order to right the historical wrong of neglecting areas of mass killing, Desbois helped found Yahad-In Unum, combing the Hebrew word-Yahad, meaning "together," with the Latin phrase In Unum, meaning "in one."

The global organization collects eyewitness testimony and forensic evidence about the mass killing of Jews and Roma in Ukraine, Russia, Belarus, Lithuania, Poland, Moldova and Romania between 1941 and 1944. Local contemporary witnesses are interviewed about the mass shootings that occurred near their homes and the mass graves are located and documented. Desbois (2008) estimates that there are no less than 1 million victims buried in 1,200 graves in Ukraine. Yahad-In Unum's work is crucial to counter claims of Holocaust deniers who use lack of official documentation to makes claims on the validity of Holocaust evidence. Yahad-In Unum has received widespread praise among Holocaust institutions and their work has documented at this moment 1,843 execution sites.

Yahad-In Unum hopes by exposing evidence of these lesser-known crimes against humanity, they are bringing closure to the memory of the victims. A forward-thinking organization, they hope to spread awareness of the need to recognize and denounce the ongoing epidemic of global genocide. Yahad-In Unum and Patrick Desbois have also worked to document the Yazidi genocide in Iraq committed by the Islamic State. As time passes, it seems that NGOs will be some of the leading institutions that seek to properly commemorate and document the Holocaust by Bullets in the former Soviet Union. Father Debois and his team have recently interviewed Chicago Holocaust survivors from the FSU who witnessed or learned about the killings of their families.

The Soviet Jewish Experience

Significant progress has been made in the documentation of killing sites and in remembrance of Soviet Jewish victims of the Holocaust and in recognition of the survivors from the USSR. This work has had the unfortunate burden of beginning just as the last survivor and witness generations reach old age. Only since the fall of the Soviet Union have Soviet Jews gained an opportunity to tell their stories of survival and commemorate their family members murdered by the Nazis. Crucial to this development has been the work of individuals and organizations to recognize the separate experiences of Jews during the war, and document and research the Holocaust by Bullets in Eastern Europe. During the post war years of the USSR, Soviet authorities prevented the recognition of a separate Jewish experience during WWII due to political concerns and anti-Semitism. The fall of the USSR allowed for Jewish immigration to places where some found communities more welcome to hearing their stories of persecution.

There is still much work to do in gaining wider recognition for Soviet Jewish survivors. Local to Chicago, Holocaust Community Services is an organization that seeks to publicize and

educate on the Holocaust in the former Soviet Union and document the stories of Soviet Jewish Holocaust survivors that now live in the United States. Abroad, the politics of memory of the Holocaust in the former Soviet states often remains contentious, with patriotic celebration of history often turning into a whitewashing of collaboration with the Nazis. The Holocaust by Bullets, and those Soviet Jews who survived must be a crucial part of any narrative of the Holocaust. The final generation of Soviet survivors are now in old age, many children or teenagers during the war. Their memories of their families murdered by the Nazis, and often of their parents who never got a chance to speak about their survival, offer some of our last personal connections to the victims of the Holocaust. Their stories must be listened to and documented. Soviet survivor Yakov Mozyrsky was interviewed only recently on his wartime experience as a Jewish child. His father had fought with the Soviet army for the complete duration of the war. He recounts:

> In October 1945 Papa was discharged and came back to Timashevo to find us, and together we returned to Kiev. I remember that we walked along poorly lit railroads to the house in which we lived before the war. No one knew what to expect. I stumbled and fell on a rail. When Dad picked me up and lifted me up high, I saw tears in his eyes. These were the eyes of a man who had gone through the entire war, who had seen blood and death, who was wounded several times, and who now simply got scared for his son. These eyes I would never forget. (Mozyrsky, 2020)

For this last generation of Soviet survivors, the memories of the war never left, we should cherish the opportunity to learn from and recognize the Soviet Jewish experience.

Further Resources

Books

Through Soviet Jewish Eyes: Photography, War and the Holocaust by David Shneer

Never Heard Never Forget produced by Holocaust Community Services. A compilation of Soviet Jewish survivor's stories who immigrated to United States and settled in Chicago.

The Holocaust by Bullets: A Priest's Journey to Uncover the Truth Behind the Murder of 1.5 Million Jews by Patrick Desbois. Also see https://www.yahadinunum.org/

A Writer at War: A Soviet Journalist with the Red Army, 1941-1945 by Vasily Grossman. Grossman takes the reader through the chaos of the Nazi invasion to the liberation of Nazi death camps. A Soviet Jew, Grossman was popular among soldiers for his honest reporting of the front. Grossman intended to publish his accounts of the Nazi Holocaust in *The Black Book of Soviet Jewry*, which eventually was published in English and is also available to read.

The Bones of Berdichev: The Life and Fate of Vasily Grossman by John Garrad and Carol Garrad

Holocaust in the Ukraine by Boris Zabarko

The Ravine: A Family, A Photograph, a Holocaust Massacre Revealed by Wendy Lower

In Chicago

Professor Elliot Lefkowitz recorded around 50 video interviews with survivors from FSU, which are all in the Illinois Holocaust Museum's collection. These interviews offer a great resource for anyone looking to research the FSU further and watch eye-witness testimony.

Films

Come and See (1985) directed by Elem Klimov. An intense and historically accurate depiction of the brutality of war in the FSU. Considered one of the best movies about war ever made, this film is helpful for understanding the conditions many Soviet survivors "fled" from, as the verbiage used does not accurately describe the horrors many endured to survive.

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