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Panel: “Between History, Memories, Real Socialism, and Everyday Life: Jewish Identity in the Soviet Union, East Germany, Poland and Jugoslavia (1945-1991)”

Beyond Babi Yar: Holocaust Memory and Jewish Life in the Postwar USSR (1945-1991)

On September 19, 1961, three months before an Israeli tribunal sentenced Adolph Eichmann to death, Yevgeny Yevtushenko’s poem “Babi Yar” appeared in *Literaturnaia Gazeta*, the official organ of the Union of Soviet Writers.¹ In this audacious poem, Yevtushenko denounced those anti-Semites who hide behind Russia’s “purest name,” declaring himself to be “a genuine Russian” for his empathy for the persecuted victims of anti-Semitism over the centuries. These victims included the 33,771 Kiev Jews killed by the Nazis from September 29-30, 1941, in the Babi Yar ravine north of the city, and the thousands more massacred there over the next two years.²

The publication of Yevtushenko’s poem, and the wave of cultural production it inspired, established Babi Yar as the definitive “lieux de memoire” associated with the Holocaust on Soviet territory.³ Paradoxically, the poem also popularized the notion that no discussion of the Holocaust occurred under Soviet socialism. The poem’s famous opening line – “There are no memorials over Babi Yar” – distills the pervasive assumption regarding the absence of a collective Holocaust memory in the Soviet Union. Until recently, little was known about Soviet Holocaust commemoration beyond the efforts of a few prominent writers, such as Vasily Grossman and Ilya Ehrenburg, the co-compilers of *The Black Book*, the first attempt to comprehensively document the Nazi massacres of Soviet Jewry.⁴ But these exceptions vindicated the general assumption that the Soviet “Jews of Silence” were not permitted to, and thus did not, publicly commemorate their suffering under the Nazis.⁵

That Yevtushenko was not the first Soviet artist to commemorate the victims of Babi Yar belies this assumption. Ehrenburg’s 1944 poem “Babi Yar” lamented the slaughter of his “countless relatives,” and Mark Donskoi’s 1945 film *The Unvanquished* dramatized the massacre.⁶ And Babi Yar was but one site of memory among many. In his study on Jewish grassroots efforts to build Holocaust monuments in the Soviet Union, Arkadi Zeltser corrects the “widespread opinion about the absence of monuments, which may be defined as ‘Babi Yar syndrome.’”⁷ Zeltser’s efforts are representative of a broader trend over the past twenty years or so, as scholars across various subfields have sought to administer a cure for “Babi Yar syndrome,” uncovering the

ways that Soviet Jews *did* record, document, commemorate, and represent in various aesthetic forms the collective cataclysm they experienced during the years of Nazi occupation. New approaches to Soviet Holocaust memory--to use James Young's terminology--take up both intellectuals' "textual monuments" and those "monuments of stone" that communities of everyday Jews erected across the Soviet Union.⁸

In what follows, I will chart the salient themes and issues in these recent discussions regarding the formation of collective Holocaust memory and its role in Jewish life in the postwar Soviet Union. I will begin with some remarks on the heterogeneity of Soviet Jewry, breaking down how different Jewish subgroups' experiences during Nazi occupation fostered different memory cultures. After then summarizing the shifting contours of the Party-State's official war myth over time, I will conclude with a discussion of how recent studies of Soviet-Jewish memory culture refract an unresolved debate about the overall meaning of the Soviet-Jewish experience within the broader arc of Jewish modernity.

The limitations and possibilities of postwar commemoration cannot be understood without appreciating the zeal of Soviet anti-anti-Semitism during the war years themselves. Especially during the dark years of 1941-43, to mobilize as many Soviet citizens as possible, the regime allowed for a surprising degree of direct public discussion of Nazi brutality--toward Jewish and non-Jewish Soviet civilians alike. This impulse inspired the creation of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, a group of prominent Soviet-Jewish intellectuals who toured the world raising awareness about the Nazi genocide of European Jewry. Film constituted an especially important venue for the propagation of Soviet anti-anti-Semitism.⁹ With the changing tide of the war and ultimate Soviet victory, however, the tenor of commemoration shifted from mournful to heroic. But even in the immediate postwar years, the Party-State persisted in drawing international attention to Nazi atrocities against Jews. The Soviet Union was the only allied power to call Jewish witnesses to the stand at the Nuremberg trials--trials that would likely not have occurred without Soviet insistence.¹⁰ Recent scholarship on the hundreds of thousands of Soviet war crimes trials conducted throughout the postwar period have located in these prosecution records an explicit, if secret, discussion of the Nazi genocide of Soviet Jewry.¹¹

Of the six million Jews murdered by the Nazis, over 2.5 million perished within the 1941 borders of the Soviet Union.¹² Roughly 1.7 million of these victims lived in regions forcibly annexed to the Soviet Union

in 1939-40, the region that became the eye of the Nazis' genocidal storm after Operation Barbarossa commenced in June 1941. Most of these Jews did not perish in death camps but were rounded up and shot by mobile killing squads and their local collaborators during the first months of the Nazi occupation, before the implementation of the "Final Solution" in January 1942.¹³ These "westerner" Jews thus lived very briefly as Soviet citizens. They also tended to have a "thicker" Jewish culture than their generally more acculturated and secular co-religionists living further east in the major Soviet urban centers.¹⁴ Vibrant secular and religious Jewish movements that were all but stamped out in the early Soviet Union such as Zionism, Orthodoxy, and nationally oriented Jewish socialism, persisted in interwar Poland and the Baltic regions. The rapid and intimate nature of the Nazi genocide in the occupied territories contrasted markedly with the experience of the one million Soviet Jews who lived on territories beyond the Nazi zone of occupation, and the one-and-a-half million who succeeded in fleeing eastward (along with 500,000 Polish-Jewish refugee-evacuees).¹⁵

These distinctions had profound consequences on the development of postwar collective memory. Many of the few "westerners" who survived the war continued living alongside neighbors who had aided, or turned a blind eye to, the Nazi massacres of Jews. Their very survival functioned as a suspicious mark of Cain in the eyes of the Soviet authorities.¹⁶ The near-total disappearance of the communities comprising the historic cradle of East European Jewry motivated many Baltic Jews to "rediscover" their Jewishness in the postwar years.¹⁷ It is no accident that the Baltic region became a hotbed of Holocaust commemorative activity in the early 1960s, and the first site of Jewish samizdat production later in the decade.¹⁸

Among the more assimilated Jews that had been Soviet citizens since the October Revolution direct participation in collective Holocaust commemoration in the early 1960s would have been much rarer. Yet they faced a different stigma. Their relatively high survival rate compared with the "westerners" fueled the anti-Semitic myth of "the Tashkent front," the notion that assimilated Jews had used their special connections to escape the war and hide out in the east. (In reality, Jews fought in the Red Army in significant numbers.¹⁹) Accordingly, Jewish samizdat from the 1970s showcases a concerted effort to counter the myth of the Tashkent Front by recovering and documenting Jewish heroism in the Red Army.²⁰

The Nazi occupation and the Soviet triumph over fascism were bound to excite Jewish national pride even among the most Sovietized Jews. The prolific Russian-Jewish writer Ilya Ehrenburg, one of the most prominent propagandists during the Stalin period, captured this unintended consequence of Nazi genocide best in an August 1941 speech: “I grew up in a Russian city. My mother tongue is Russian. I am a Russian writer. Like all Russians, I am now defending my homeland. But the Hitlerites have reminded me of something else: my mother’s name was Hannah. I am a Jew. I say this with pride. Hitler hates us more than anything. And this adorns us.”²¹ The Soviet recalcitrance to recognize particularistic Jewish suffering further “adorned” the Soviet Jews throughout the postwar period with a national pride rooted in collective suffering. As one Jewish author perversely put in in a 1974 samizdat piece published in the Moscow periodical, *Jews in the USSR*, “It was death in the gas chambers that brought Jews of all countries closer to one another.”²²

The excitement of Jewish nationalism accelerated with the creation of the State of Israel and Golda Meir’s visit to the USSR in 1948. Of course, Soviet diplomatic and military support, motivated by a desire to frustrate British imperialism in the Middle East, was instrumental in securing the Jewish state’s establishment. But after Stalin refused to allow Soviet Jews to emigrate to the new Jewish state, Soviet-Israeli relations deteriorated. Anti-Zionism was to guide Soviet foreign policy in the Middle East until the state’s collapse. As the Cold War set in, state anti-Semitism reached its apex: Stalin’s anti-cosmopolitan campaigns began, the Jewish Anti-Fascist committee was broken up, and the manuscript of Grossman and Ehrenburg’s *Black Book* was suppressed in 1948, as a new official war myth crystalized. This myth took on special importance for the entire postwar period. It was openly questioned during the Thaw era, officially revived for much of Brezhnev’s long rule, and bitterly contested in the turbulent *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* process unleashed by Gorbachev’s reforms in the late 1980s.

Central to this myth was what historian Amir Weiner has called “ethnic hierarchies of heroism and the simultaneous leveling of suffering.”²³ In other words, while insisting that the many nations of the USSR had suffered equally under the Nazis, some (like the Russians) had behaved more bravely than others (like the Jews, or those nationalities subjected to genocidal deportations during the war, such as the Crimean Tatars). In her study on the Holocaust in Soviet film, Olga Gershenson develops a related point that no explicit ban on

public discussion of the Holocaust existed in the Soviet Union. Instead, she argues, two mechanisms were deployed to control the conversation. The first was universalization, by which the Holocaust was subsumed “as a part of overall Soviet tragedy, with Jews euphemistically labeled ‘peaceful Soviet citizens.’” The second was externalization, or the purposeful location of the Holocaust exclusively “over there,” beyond the borders of the victorious Soviet Union.²⁴

Weiner’s and Gershenson’s models are helpful in making sense of how the Soviets selectively recovered a usable, triumphant past from the rubble to which the Nazi conflict had reduced much of the country.²⁵ But the regime’s discouragement of memorial activity was hardly limited to Jews, and thus cannot be explained solely by anti-Semitism. The diverse priorities that shaped the late Stalinist war myth included transitioning the country into a more “festive atmosphere”²⁶ by downplaying the devastation of the war; the quelling of ethnic tensions caused by the war, especially in annexed territories; the negation of individual or group claims to hero or victim status, which challenged the Party’s total authority; and securing the political support of the most populous ethnic groups (i.e., Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians).

The “black years” of late Stalinism and the revival of a Stalinist memory regime during the Brezhnev years left little room for discussion of civilian casualties of any ethnicity. The paradox of the Soviet Holocaust was that despite the total devastation wrought on Soviet Jewry, thanks to evacuation efforts, the vastness of the Soviet Union, and the ultimate Soviet victory over Nazi fascism, Soviet Jews survived in relatively high numbers compared with Jews in other countries impacted by the Holocaust. At the same time, due to the general genocidal nature of the war on the eastern front, non-Jewish civilians throughout the Nazi-occupied Soviet Union suffered a much crueler fate than the Christians of Nazi-occupied Western Europe. Soviet Jews’ postwar attempts to narrate their recent horrific past were unique in that they clashed not only with the state’s memory regime, but also with numerous nationalities’ simultaneous claims to superlative suffering, at the hands of both Hitler and Stalin. It is this multinational dimension that makes Holocaust memory construction in the USSR a unique case in the comparative study of the role that collective trauma played in national and religious mobilization throughout the postwar socialist world.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s Khrushchev's "Thaw" considerably expanded the possibilities for new forms of commemoration. When in his 1956 Secret Speech Khrushchev lambasted Stalin's handling of World War Two and its public memory, the state began revealing the extent of the war's destruction and expending significant resources to commemorate civilian casualties. Liberalizations in the cultural sphere allowed for the production and official dissemination of culture that directly addressed previously taboo aspects of the war, including the Holocaust. While Yevtushenko's poem announced the new, non-Jewish recognition of Jewish suffering, lesser-known works by Soviet Jews, such as Boris Slutsky's Shoah poetry and Valentin Vinogradov's 1966 film about the Minsk ghetto *Eastern Corridor*, marked the continued tolerance of Holocaust commemoration even into the early Brezhnev era. Moreover, Khrushchev allowed for a revival of the state-subsidized Yiddish culture eradicated during Stalin's last years. From its founding in 1961 until the USSR's collapse, the bi-monthly Yiddish periodical *Sovetish Heymland* constituted another overlooked locus of explicit discussion of Jewish suffering during the Holocaust.²⁷

A complex nexus of domestic and international circumstances in the late 1960s caused the Party-State to resurrect a Stalinist war memory culture that aggrandized heroism and minimized suffering, especially of national minorities like Jews. Two related factors were central to this transitory period: the ramping up of Soviet anti-Zionism after the Israeli victory in the Six-Day War, and the emergence of an organized sphere of dissent and samizdat. The historiography has privileged the former factor, but it is worth considering the contrary argument from the Soviet-Jewish dissident and eventual Israeli émigré Mikhail Agurskii, who noted, "it was not the Six Day War [in 1967 -SF] that marked the beginning of a new wave of anti-Semitism in the USSR, but the events in Czechoslovakia [in 1968-S.F.] interpreted by... [Communist Party hardliners -S.F.] as the result of Zionist diversion."²⁸ After all, the first Jewish samizdat periodical, *Iton*, published in Riga, did not appear until 1970. Soviet Jews had always lived (and many of them had ardently contributed to) anti-Zionism. What was different after an "imaginary public sphere" had crystallized in the Thaw years was that the regime increasingly perceived Jews as dissidents.²⁹ And not without some basis. Besides the Zionist movement, a disproportionate number of Jews participated in the Russian, Ukrainian, and Lithuanian democratic movements.

Israel became an appealing option for more and more Soviet Jews throughout the 1970s less because of the Jewish state's militaristic success, and more because the upward mobility and vibrant state-sponsored culture that had marked the first half of the Soviet-Jewish experience had given way to a very different reality. Anti-Semitic policies such as quotas limiting the number of Jews admitted to universities, and the pervasive association in the Soviet press of Jews with pernicious, alien influence made Jews feel less at home in the USSR. Throughout Jewish *samizdat*, the Holocaust and late Stalinist anti-Semitism serve as critical historical vindications for national mobilization, and, increasingly as time went on, for the right to emigrate to Israel. Soviet anti-Semitism compelled the country's Jews to discover within themselves what Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi called interminable Judaism--that is, "to realize that vital aspects of their lives ... [were] still determined by ancestral choices they [felt] they ... [had] transcended or repudiated."³⁰ This realization paradoxically prompted a prominent few to set about actively re-inventing those ancestral traditions.

But not all, or even most, Soviet Jews, cultivated an active Jewish identity during the era of real socialism. The vast majority of Soviet Jews remained secular, Russian-speaking, assimilated, educated, urban Soviet citizens. They were Jews only because line five of their passports said they were. The high number of Soviet Jews who were permitted to emigrate to Israel in the 1960s and 1970s but ended up in Europe or the USA, demonstrates that even among those Soviet Jews bold enough to risk everything to leave their native country, many were not ultimately interested in starting a life in Israel. When in late 1989 Gorbachev lifted emigration restrictions most Jewish emigres ended up in Israel not because they had all become dogged Zionist ideologues, but because the USA had stopped taking in Soviet Jews as refugees.³¹ Indeed, many Soviet emigres in Israel and their progeny continue to speak Russian and to vote for special interest political parties like *Yisrael Beiteinu*.

This debate concerning how Jewish, and, relatedly, how Soviet, Jews felt in the postwar USSR foregrounds the central challenges of Jewish modernity: the possibilities of assimilation, the protracted struggle for political emancipation, and the role of anti-Semitism in shaping modern Jewish identity. As scholars draw attention to previously overlooked monuments of stone and text Soviet Jews erected, there is an observable tendency in the more reductive of these studies to approach Soviet-Jewish identity as a zero-sum game between

the two elements of this identity: Soviet and Jewish. These works read all Holocaust commemorative activity as an activity necessarily limited by and opposed to the anti-Semitic Soviet state. Such an investment in binary identities misses the singularity of the Soviet moment to Jewish modernity, clouding the enthusiasm engendered by its early emancipatory promises and, consequently, the bitterness of its postwar disappointments.

More sophisticated scholarship on Jewish memory formation captures the complex syncretism of Soviet-Jewish identity, attending to the paradoxical ways that the Soviet state, like the Russian Empire before it, offered Jews upward social mobility in exchange for assimilation, while never fully permitting Jews to achieve this assimilation. These antimonies fostered a heterogeneous Soviet-Jewish Holocaust memory culture, which cannot be wholly reduced to anti-Soviet dissent, even if the regime interpreted it as such. Anti-Semitism must be considered as a pervasive factor in Jewish life throughout the postwar Soviet Union, but scholars should not ignore that the Soviet patriotic pride in saving “humanity from the Nazis during World War II [that] was ... added to the ... messianic 1930s idea of transforming society ... was ... even dearer to Jews than to most other ethnic groups.”³² The Soviet regime ignored history by attempting to create a universalized and externalized “Holocaust without Jews.” Historians should avoid overcorrecting for this tragedy by reifying Jewish collective memory as history and constructing a “Holocaust without Soviet citizens.”

¹ Joshua Rubenstein, *Tangled Loyalties: The Life and Times of Ilya Ehrenburg* (Basic Books: New York: 1996) 318-319, 440, fn. 23.

² For a bilingual version of the poem see Yevgeny Yevtushenko, *Yevtushenko Poems*, trans. Herbert Marshall (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1966) 104-109.

³ Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” *Representations*, 26 (1989) 7-24.

⁴ Ilya Ehrenburg and Vasily Grossman, *The Complete Black Book of Russian Jewry*, trans. and ed. by David Patterson (London: 2017).

⁵ Elie Wiesel, *The Jews of Silence: A Personal Report on Soviet Jewry*, trans. Neal Kozodoy (New York: Schocken Books, 2011).

⁶ For Ehrenburg’s poem see Joshua Rubenstein, *Tangled Loyalties: The Life and Times of Ilya Ehrenburg* (Basic Books: New York: 1996) 209. For more on *The Unvanquished* see Olga Gershenson, *The Phantom Holocaust: Soviet Cinema and Jewish Catastrophe* (Rutgers University Press: New Brunswick, 2013) 40-56; Jeremy Hicks, *First Films of the Holocaust: Soviet Cinema and the Genocide of the Jews, 1938–46* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012) 134-156.

⁷ Zeltser, *Unwelcome Memory*, 20-21.

⁸ James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 7.

⁹ Jeremy Hicks, *First Films of the Holocaust: Soviet Cinema and the Genocide of the Jews, 1938–46* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012).

¹⁰ Lawrence Douglas, *The Memory of Judgement: Making Law and History in the Trials of the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001) 78.

¹¹ Tanja Penter, “Collaboration on Trial: New Source Material on Soviet Postwar Trials against Collaborators,” *Slavic Review*, vol. 64 no. 4 (2005) 782-790.

¹² Yitzhak Arad, *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009) 525.

¹³ Gershenson, *The Phantom Holocaust*, 6.

¹⁴ Zeltser, *Unwelcome Memory*, 29.

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- ¹⁵ Ibid., 29. Gershenson, *The Phantom Holocaust*, 6-7. For more on the Polish refugees see Mark Edele, Sheila Fitzpatrick, Atina Grossmann, eds., *Shelter from the Holocaust: Rethinking Jewish Survival in the Soviet Union* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2017).
- ¹⁶ Franziska Exeler, "What Did You Do during the War? Critical Responses to the Aftermath of Nazi Occupation," *Kritika*, 17:4 (2016) 805-835.
- ¹⁷ Amir Weiner, *Making Sense of War: The Second World War and the Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000) 207-8.
- ¹⁸ Gal Beckerman, *When They Come For Us, We'll Be Gone: The Epic Struggle to Save Soviet Jewry* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010) 13-38.
- ¹⁹ Mordecai Altshuler, "Jewish Combatants of the Red Army Confront the Holocaust," in Harriet Murav and Gennady Estraiikh, eds., *Soviet Jews in WWII: Fighting, Witnessing, Remembering*, pp. 16-35 (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2014).
- ²⁰ *Evreiskii Samizdat* vol. 9 (The Hebrew University Centre for Research and Documentation of East European Jewry: Jerusalem, 1975).
- ²¹ Joshua Rubenstein, "Il'ia Ehrenburg and the Holocaust in the Soviet Press," in Murav and Gennady Estraiikh, eds., *Soviet Jews in WWII*, 36-56. Quote on 39.
- ²² I. Domal'skii, "Natsiia ili ne natsiia?" in *Evrei v SSSR*, no. 9, *Evreiskii Samizdat* vol. 11 (The Hebrew University Centre for Research and Documentation of East European Jewry: Jerusalem, 1976) 27-33. Quote on 33.
- ²³ Weiner, *Making Sense of War*, 208.
- ²⁴ Gershenson, *The Phantom Holocaust*, 2.
- ²⁵ Weiner, *Making Sense*, 235.
- ²⁶ Zeltser, *Unwelcome Memory*, 89.
- ²⁷ Anna Shternshis, "How (not) to Say Gulag in Yiddish: Soviet Yiddish Intellectuals and the early Days of Thaw," Presentation at Jewish Dissidents in the Eastern Bloc International Conference-Webinar, Selma Stern Zentrum für Jüdische Studien Berlin-Brandenburg, 4/14/2021.
- ²⁸ Mikhail Agursky, *Pepel Klaasa: Razryv* (Jerusalem 1996), 329.
- ²⁹ For the idea of an "imaginary public sphere" in late Soviet society, see Kevin M.F. Platt and Benjamin Nathans, "Socialist in Form, Indeterminate in Content: The Inns and Outs of Late Soviet Culture," *Ab Imperio* 2/2011, 301-324, 319.
- ³⁰ Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Freud's Moses: Judaism Terminable and Interminable* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991) 10.
- ³¹ Yinon Cohen, Yitchak Haberfeld & Irena Kogan, "Who went where? Jewish immigration from the Former Soviet Union to Israel, the USA and Germany, 1990–2000." *Israel Affairs*, vol. 17, no. 1, 7-20, 8.
- ³² Zeltser, *Unwelcome Memory*, 48.