

# Politics of Memory of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union

Olga Baranova

IWM Junior Visiting Fellows' Conference Proceedings, Vol. XXXIV ©  
2015 by the author

Readers may redistribute this article to other individuals for noncommercial use, provided that the text and this note remain intact. This article may not be reprinted or redistributed for commercial use without prior written permission from the author. If you have any questions about permissions, please contact the IWM.



*Abstract: The paper investigates how the issue of the Holocaust was presented in Soviet historiography in post-war period. Despite the fact that the Holocaust is an integral part of the history of WWII, and that about one third of all killed Jews were Soviet citizens who often met their death in numerous killing sites on the occupied territories of the Soviet Union, the Jewish tragedy was largely ignored by Soviet historians. Western scholars argued that, due to Stalinist anti-Semitism and its legacy, Soviet authorities deliberately suppressed any public discussion of the Holocaust. They referred to the notorious example of the Soviet treatment of the Black Book of Soviet Jewry prepared by Ilya Ehrenburg and Vasilij Grossman. The book, which contained important material on the fate of Soviet Jews during WWII was banned in 1948. The paper acknowledges that Soviet accounts in general downplayed or universalized the tragedy of the Jews and that Soviet scholars often preferred to refrain from mentioning the Jewish origin of many Nazi victims and Soviet resistance fighters. However, it demonstrates that the Holocaust was not completely erased from Soviet history books, but was adapted and rewritten within the confines of a conforming ideological narrative. It also argues that, despite centralized censorship, there were some variations in historiographies of national republics. This paper does not disregard Stalinist anti-Semitism, but it also provides a more nuanced understanding of the whole spectrum of ideological reasons why the tragedy of the Jews was downplayed in many works of the Soviet period.*

*Note: This working paper benefited from EURIAS fellowship at the Institute for Human Sciences (IWM) in Vienna.*

## Soviet Historiography of 'the Great Patriotic War'

Known as 'the Great Patriotic War', WWII was a seminal event in Soviet history, leaving a profound legacy and having tremendous repercussions for society. The Soviet Union lost an estimated 20 – 27 million lives of its citizens.[1] During the first post-war decades the issue of WWII and the Nazi occupation of the Soviet territories attracted much attention from Soviet historians, publicists and novelists who produced a wealth of literature on

this topic. The enormous interest in this subject can be explained by the fact that the events of the four-year period of war and occupation profoundly affected the lives of millions of Soviet people who were eager to know what actually happened and to understand the nature and origins of this brutal occupation. However, during the first post-war decades, under the influence of the Cold War events, the 'stories' about WWII and the Nazi occupation of the Soviet Union became not only a subject of scholarly research or a part of popular culture, but an important tool in state propaganda that was often exploited in the political struggle, and the narrative of the War was masterly used by the authorities for the formation of a unifying Soviet identity.

Soviet official multi-volume monographs, based primarily on documents from Soviet State and Party archives that primarily included the directives of the Higher Command and the records kept by the partisan units, represented the war as a genuine popular resistance and defensive struggle for liberation against the Nazi invader. Moreover, it was presented as a unifying experience that was supposed to reinforce the feeling of community among the Soviet people. Every child who was born and grown up in the Soviet Union had to learn about the patriotism and sacrifice of the Soviet people who all, regardless of nationality and social background, fought together against the common enemy for the liberation of the motherland.

The terminology used by Soviet historians to describe the war is also very revealing. Soviet works played strongly on the patriotic theme: for example, the war was called the 'Great Patriotic war' while the terms like 'popular struggle for liberation' stress the notion of the common interests of all Soviet peoples and the Soviet government in this combined struggle against the foreign invader. On the other hand, the terms 'Nazi occupiers' or 'German-fascist invaders' raise the expectation that the only response could have been opposition and resistance.

Most of the earliest Soviet studies were characterized by a self-congratulatory tone and general statements and even the works pertaining to individual Soviet republics rarely presented the stories of particular national, ethnic or social groups or individuals. Soviet historiography emphasized such issues as the heroism and sacrifice of the Soviet people as a whole, the Red Army operations, the importance of the resistance movement, the leading role of the Communist party, and never forgot the Nazi systematic execution of Soviet commissars and prisoners of war (POWs) and brutalities and atrocities committed by the Nazis against Soviet civilians.

From the early 1960s, the guerilla partisan resistance movement was extensively publicized through a range of memoir literature and specialist historical works. Partisan resistance was presented as a steady popular movement that from the first days of the occupation had been consistently growing in strength and had been wholeheartedly supported by all circles of occupied society. The clearest examples of this kind of approach are the six-volume encyclopedia "*История Великой Отечественной войны Советского Союза 1941 – 1945*" (History of the Great Patriotic War of the Soviet Union, 1941 – 1945) published by the Soviet Ministry of Defense in Moscow between 1960 and 1965 and the three volume work "*Всенародная борьба в Белоруссии против немецко-фашистских захватчиков в годы Великой Отечественной войны*" (The Popular

Resistance Struggle in Belarus Against the German-Fascist Occupiers during the Great Patriotic War) prepared by the Academy of Sciences of the BSSR in Minsk between 1982 and 1985. In contrast, the German reports about the situation in the occupied territories, as well as early Soviet partisan reports, clearly stress the weakness of the partisan resistance movement during the period of 1941 – 1942 (Hill, 2005: 8).

Among subjects usually avoided by Soviet historians were Soviet citizens' collaboration with the Nazis, anti-Semitism among the civilian population and in the armed forces, and facts of participation and extent of involvement of local Soviet citizens in the persecution of their Jewish neighbours. Interestingly, the testimonies about the war of Soviet veterans and war-time residents almost completely agreed with the official version of war history. Cases of cooperation with the occupying authorities were almost never mentioned publicly in their war recollections or published memoirs. The explanation for that might have been the fact that their works were censored or it could have been the result of self-censorship.

## **Soviet Treatment of the Holocaust**

---

Although during the first post-war decades the Soviet historiography extensively emphasized the atrocities and brutalities committed by the Nazis against the Soviet citizens: systematic execution of Soviet commissars by the *Einsatzgruppen* and sufferings of Soviet POWs and civilians in Nazi concentration camps, it rarely concentrated specifically on the tragedy of the Jewish population under the occupation.

It is well known that approximately six million Jewish men, women, and children were killed in the Holocaust in mass shootings and in the Nazi concentration and death camps during WWII, however it somewhat less known that about one-third of all Jews who died in the Holocaust were Soviet citizens, who lived in the Soviet territories before 1941. They included also those Jews living in territories of western Belarus and Ukraine (eastern Poland) and the Baltic states annexed by the Soviets in 1939 – 1940 according to Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. The statistics on the number of Jews who died in the Soviet Union during WWII vary to a great extent, however according to most estimates between 1.5 million and 2.5 million of Soviet Jews were murdered in the Holocaust and about 200,000 more died in combat. It was about 10 per cent of all Soviet deaths, at a time when Jews were only 2.5 percent of the total pre-war Soviet population.[2] However, despite the fact that of all the peoples inhabiting the western borderlands of the Soviet Union the heaviest losses had been borne by the Jews, it was discouraged to emphasize Jewish origin of many victims.

American Jewish scholar and activist William Korey – director of Anti-Defamation League who fought for the interests and rights of Jews in the Soviet Union and wrote extensively on anti-Semitism in Russia, argued that “Soviet authorities suppressed any public discussion of the Holocaust and attempted to obliterate the Holocaust in the memories of Soviet Jews as well as non-Jews” (Korey, 1983: 53). According to Korey, while in the West, especially in the United States, the Holocaust was emphasized in curricula for children and adults, Soviet elementary and secondary school textbooks carried no references to Jews or anti-Semitism at all. British Jewish historian Lukasz

Hirszowicz, in his article “The Holocaust in the Soviet Mirror” argued that after analysis of public commemoration policies, exhibitions dedicated to the Great Patriotic war, textbooks, academic publications, literature and films there is a general feeling that the Holocaust in the Soviet Union is a kind of non-event (Hirszowicz, 1993: 29). Western scholars argued that it was a deliberate policy of the Soviet regime to conceal the murder of the Jews because of Stalin’s anti-Semitism, its legacy and traditional hostility towards Jewish culture.

Stalin’s anti-Semitism definitely played important role in this attitude. Although historians still differ in their explanations of reasons for Stalin’s anti-Semitism, it is well known that Stalin fostered several anti-Semitic campaigns and show trials in the Soviet Union including arrests, imprisonment, and execution of many Jews in 1948 (some of them leaders of the Jewish anti-fascist committee created during the war), execution of Jewish writers in 1952, and the so called ‘doctor’s plot’ when six Jewish doctors were imprisoned for allegedly conspiring to murder Stalin. American Jewish scholar and political scientist Zvi Gitelman in his article “Politics and the Historiography of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union” described the position of Jews in post-war Soviet Union as “a different kind of the Holocaust was being prepared for them after the war” (Gitelman, 1997: 28). In the Cold War hysteria of the early 1950s, Soviets re-adopted many Nazi stereotypes about the Jews. Whereas the Nazis, in their notorious ‘documentary’ film *Der ewige Jude* (The Eternal Jew), had presented Jews simultaneously as communist agents and as agents of international capitalism, the Soviet authorities opted only for the second stereotype. Soviet Jews in the first post-war decades were seen as dangerous ‘cosmopolitans’ with international connections (especially with American capitalism and imperialism) and dubious national loyalties (Fox, 2004: 421). Although the worst excesses subsided after the death of Stalin in 1953, the inhibitions, taboos, and distortions regarding ‘Jewish’ matters lingered for decades in the Soviet Union (Gitelman, 1997: 24).

One cannot deny that anti-Semitism took place in the Soviet Union and that Soviet accounts about the war in general downplayed or universalized the murder of the Soviet Jews, however the event of such magnitude was not completely erased from Soviet history books, but it was adapted and rewritten within the confines of a conforming ideological narrative, and within this general framework there was also some room for exceptions and for variations based on national histories.

Gitelman states that the word ‘Holocaust’ itself was unknown for Soviet historians, it did not enter Russian usage until the 1990s and was transliterated from English. However, Soviet historians never denied the Holocaust. In discussions of the destruction of the Jews Soviet historians used other terms like “extermination”, “annihilation” (*уничтожение*) or “catastrophe” (*катастрофа*). The Great Soviet Encyclopedia admitted that “Nazi carried out a policy of mass extermination of the Jews and about six million Jews were murdered in WWII, among them many Soviet ones” (The Great Soviet Encyclopedia, 1970; English translation, vol. 9, 1975: 293). 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 Jewish tragedy, others discuss only some aspects of it, while others prefer to refrain from mentioning the national and ethnic origin of victims. Therefore, one

may conclude that even if there was some official Soviet policy with regard to the treatment of the Holocaust it was not applied universally and diligently (Gitelman, 1997: 18).

However, what is important about Soviet historiography of the first post-war decades is that it did not treat the Holocaust as a separate, uniquely Jewish, phenomenon and fate. When Soviet historians did discuss the Nazi atrocities against the Jews, they usually viewed that catastrophe as an integral part of a larger phenomenon – the Nazi genocide and the tragedy of all Soviet people (whether Jews, Russians, Belarusians, Ukrainians) occasioned by Nazi racism directed not only at Jews, but also at Slavs who all were targets of the Nazi policy of enslavement and extermination. In other words, Soviet historians acknowledged that many Jews were killed by the fascist and that Jews were often treated in a most brutal way, but they asserted that similar things happened also to other national groups in the occupied areas of the Soviet Union. Therefore, despite the fact that the Nazis never systematically killed Belarusian, Russian, or Ukrainian civilians solely on ethnic grounds, accounts of Jewish suffering were included as an inseparable and indistinguishable part of the martyrdom and death of all Soviet citizens. Consequently there was no special ‘Jewish Holocaust’. As Gitelman ironically noticed, “if the Nazis gave the Jews ‘special treatment’, the Soviets did not” (Gitelman, 1997: 20). It is, therefore, important to understand political-ideological reasons for such peculiar treatment of the Holocaust in Soviet history writings about WWII. Stalinist anti-Semitism along does not suffice to explain why the Jewish origin of many Nazi victims was largely ignored or avoided in Soviet historiography, there were other political, ideological and more pragmatic explanations for this.

### **Explaining Soviet Attitude Towards Jewish Tragedy**

---

One hypothesis and possible explanation might be that in the Soviet Union traditional anti-Semitism was quite strong, and the Russians as well as the Belarusians, Ukrainians, Lithuanians and other non-Jews in the national republics often used the Jews as ‘scapegoats’ and blamed them for their miseries. Communist regime in Russia initially employed many Jews in the position of authority, which they have never held before, this led many people to link Jews to Communism. In addition, in the western territories – western Belarus, western Ukraine, Lithuania, Latvia, that were occupied by the Soviets and incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1939-1940 following Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, Communist regime was unpopular. The entry of the Red Army with many Jewish officers, commissars and promises of national equality and social justice, gave hope to many Jews who previously suffered under Polish anti-Semitic regime in the 1930s. Therefore, despite some unpopular policies like nationalization of property, collectivization of land, suppression of religious and cultural activities of the Jews, many young and more radically inclined Jews welcomed the Red Army as liberators. In addition, many Jews of Eastern Poland were informed about and scared by Nazi occupation of Western Poland and the arrival of Russians meant that Germans would not come in and that was the most important thing for them. By contrast many Poles, Belarusians, Ukrainians and Baltic people perceived Soviets as invaders and Jews who celebrated the arrival of the Red Army were assumed to be Bolshevik sympathizers and betrayers of their homeland. The October

Revolution was also identified by many with the Jews. In addition, German propaganda presented the Jews as the main bearers of Bolshevism. Therefore, after WWII in order to win sympathies among non-Jews, to counter the Nazi image of Jewish-Bolshevism and to distance the Soviet regime from unpopular Jews, Soviet authorities preferred not to emphasize the Jewish role and fate during WWII. If this hypothesis is correct, one may conclude that although Soviet authorities publicly denied the existence of anti-Semitism and ethnic tensions among peoples of the Soviet Union, they were well aware of the existence of this phenomenon.

In addition, martyrdom is a powerful stimulus to a group's sense of identity. Soviet authorities used the narrative about the Great Patriotic War as a basis for legitimization of the Soviet regime and as a unifying experience that was supposed to reinforce the feeling of community among all Soviet people and to create the so called 'Soviet identity'. Therefore speaking separately of the tragedy of Jewry and emphasizing Jewish role and fate was discouraged since it could diminish all-Soviet effort and suffering, reinforce individual Jewish national consciousness and slow down assimilation of the Soviet Jews. Moreover, it was considered to be mistaken to distinguish, emphasize and single out the victimhood of the ethnic Jews because it could offend other nations and ethnic groups of the Soviet Union who also suffered and bore huge losses under the Nazi occupation. Therefore, to 'give the war to the Jews' could erode the legitimating power of the experience and could arouse great resentment by other nationalities. Moreover, "no country in the world lost as many of its non-Jewish citizens in the war against Nazism as did the Soviet Union, so that the fate of the Jews in France, Belgium, the Netherlands, or any other country in the West stands in sharp contrast to that of their co-nationals than it does in the East" (Hirszowicz, 1993: 31). Nazi victims from among non-Jewish population in the USSR were incomparably larger even than in Poland. In the Soviet Union Jewish losses constituted about 10 percent of the entire losses during the war, while in other countries the percentage of Jewish victims in comparison to non-Jews was much higher. Moreover, the main extermination camps in which the Jews were killed *en masse* by gassing were outside Soviet territory.

Furthermore, the issue of the Holocaust could raise many sensitive questions such as the relations between indigenous non-Jewish people (Ukrainians, Belarusians, Lithuanians, Latvians, etc.) in the national republics of the Soviet Union and the Jews and cooperation of some of the indigenous peoples with the Nazis in the persecution and mass murder of their Jewish neighbours. While the issue of cooperation by some Soviet citizens with the German occupation authorities in its turn could raise the question of the legitimacy of the Soviet regime. The official view and the notion that everybody was happy with Soviet rule because it represented the interests of the people led to the expectation that all Soviet citizens would have a direct interest in the preservation of this power and would feel an obligation to fight to defend their state against internal and external enemies. In this sense, the existence of cooperation suggested that some national and social groups felt that their interests were not represented or were even denied by the prevailing system of government.

At the same time, the issue of local collaboration in the Holocaust and the notion of Soviet citizens participating in the annihilation of their neighbours – fellow citizens of other ethnic origins – undermined the notion of solidarity, friendship and the common interests of all peoples in the Soviet Union. Therefore, the Soviet authorities tried to avoid any discussion that could lead to the fundamental problem of explaining how it could happen that so many people in Soviet society were so infected with anti-Semitism and were so hostile to their own regime that they cooperated with the Nazis and participated in the Nazis' work. Consequently, the facts relating to cooperation between Soviet citizens and the German occupation authorities were largely neglected and thoroughly hidden for ideological reasons during the Soviet era. The Soviet government was doggedly prosecuting and punishing those suspected of 'collaboration' as traitors in the first post-war years, but it was reluctant to acknowledge publicly that this war-time phenomenon took place on Soviet territories during the occupation. It refused to divulge the real scale of this movement and to openly analyse its origins and meaning. Even if the issue was cursorily mentioned, the Soviet historiography always provided a one-sided negative interpretation of this war phenomenon and sought to diminish its significance: the reasons for and the scale of cooperation with the Nazis were explained as the traitorous activity of a small group of bourgeois anti-Soviet elements, nationalists and former émigré, and betrayers of the motherland. Moreover, the facts of participation of the local Ukrainian, Lithuanian, Latvian, or Belarusian population in German atrocities against the Jews were never mentioned or denied in Soviet historical writings.

It is important to highlight that at the same time, the issue of the Holocaust, and the local cooperation in the persecution of the Jews was equally a source of embarrassment for émigré historians, often former supporters of the German cause, who in their writings, for understandable reasons, preferred to downplay the facts of participation of their compatriots and companions-in-arms in German atrocities against the Jews, highlighting instead their work to secure national independence whilst stressing the limited alternatives that were available to them. Belarusian émigré scholar Viktor Ostrowsky argued that "naturally, the local population took no part in these actions, on the contrary... the Belarusians, as well as the Ukrainians, met with the same fate as the Jews, though on a smaller scale" (Ostrowsky, 1960: 65) It is important to mention that Viktor Ostrowsky was a son of Rodislav Ostrowsky who during the war served as a head of the Belarusian Central Council – collaborationist organization created by Belarusian nationalists under the German occupation.

American scholar, expert in German literature, memory and Holocaust studies, Thomas C. Fox in his article "The Holocaust under Communism", argued that there was another, more nuanced reason why the issue of the Holocaust was downplayed or universalized in the early Soviet works. According to Fox, within the framework of orthodox Marxist thinking, oppression based on ethnicity, race, gender or religion was typical only for capitalist society and generally held the status of a 'secondary' phenomenon in comparison to class oppression. Anti-Semitism, for example, was viewed as a distraction created by the ruling class to divert the attention of people from their true oppressors. The Holocaust was a consequence of racist fascism (directed not only at Jews, but also at Slavs), which was, in turn, the ultimate expression of capitalism and imperialism. Thus,

the roots of the Holocaust, according to Soviet ideologists, lay in capitalism, expressed in its most degenerate form – fascism. According to Marxist ideology, by changing the economic and political system from capitalist to socialist, citizens could free themselves from such matters as anti-Semitism and racism (Fox, 2004: 420)

While in the West there was a great number of studies aimed to understand the origins of the Holocaust and to find political, cultural, psychological, sociological, and even theological explanations of this phenomenon, for the Soviets everything was much clear, the Holocaust was linked to capitalism and imperialism. Following this argument Soviet historians concluded that in the egalitarian classless society, as the Soviet Union was, the so called ‘Jewish Question’ had been officially resolved and anti-Semitism no longer existed. Consequently, participation of indigenous non-Jews of the occupied republics of the Soviet Union in the Nazi atrocities against their Jewish compatriots could not take place by definition.

### **The Black Book of Soviet Jewry**

---

Soviet Jewish novelist Ilya Ehrenburg and Soviet Jewish writer, journalist and war-correspondent Vasilij Grossman collected important material that included official documents and large number of written and oral testimonies as well as diaries and letters of Holocaust survivors and non-Jewish war-time residents about the fate of Soviet Jews during WWII. The material intended to form the *Black Book of Soviet Jewry* to be published in Russian and Yiddish in the USSR. The book had 1,200 typescript pages and was published in 1946. The correspondence between Ehrenburg and Grossman is very revealing and demonstrates how sensitive the authors of the *Black Book* were to political implications of their project. Ehrenburg in his correspondence wrote that “it is extremely important to show the solidarity of the Soviet population and the rescue of individual Jews by Russians, Belarusians and Ukrainians. Such stories will help to heal terrible wounds and raise the ideal of friendship among Soviet peoples even higher” (Redlich, 1995: 350). 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’. Ehrenburg replied that use of the word ‘Jews’ was unavoidable and he also insisted on the use of the word ‘*полицай*’ (transliterated from German *Polizei*) by which he understood not a German, but a collaborator, a member of the local auxiliary police. However, he agreed to take out the word ‘Ukrainian’ or ‘Lithuanian’ and to write just ‘*полицай*’ without specifying exactly the nationality of this person (Redlich, 1995: 353). In 1945 a review commission concluded that “too much is recounted in the sketches about the vile activity of collaborators among the Ukrainians, Lithuanians, et al.” (Redlich, 1995: 355). In 1947 the head of the Party Secretariat’s Agitprop department, Georgij Alexandrov wrote that “in reading the book [...] one gets a false picture of the true nature of fascism [...] Running through the whole book is the idea that the Germans murdered and plundered the Jews only. The reader unwittingly gets the impression that the Germans fought against the USSR for the sole purpose of destroying the Jews [...] whereas Hitler’s ruthless slaughters were carried out equally against Russians, Jews, Belarusians, Ukrainians, Lithuanians, Latvians and other peoples of the Soviet Union... As a result of these considerations, the Propaganda



department considers the publication of the *Black Book* in the USSR inadvisable” (Redlich, 1995: 366). Finally, on October 7th 1947 the decision was made that since the book “contains grave political errors”, it “may not be published” (Redlich, 1995: 368). All copies were sent to storage warehouses where they were destroyed in 1948. Thus because it singled out Jewish suffering and because it might mar 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 *sui generis*, has never been published in the USSR. However, manuscript copies survived and had been sent abroad where they were published in English, Hebrew and even in Russian languages (Russian edition was published in Israel).[3]

## Early Recollections of the Holocaust in Soviet Documents and Media

---

Although the *Black Book* has not appeared in the USSR, a considerable amount of documentary material about the Holocaust appeared during the war and its immediate aftermath. For example, the Soviet note of January 6, 1942 emphasized the Nazi treatment of the Jewish population: it mentioned the killing of Jews in Lviv, the mass execution of Jews in Kiev and murders especially directed against unarmed and defenseless Jews. In 1945 – 1946 the reports of the Extraordinary State Commissions for Establishing and Investigating the Crimes of the German Fascist Occupiers that mentioned Nazi atrocities against Jews were published. Soviet diplomat Andrej Gromyko in his declaration at the United Nations linked the Soviet support for Jewish aims in Palestine with the special sufferings of the Jewish people under the Nazi regime.

Many references to the events of the Holocaust did appear in the Soviet mass media, included in reports on war criminals and war crime trials. According to Lukasz Hirszowicz this was because of Soviet interest in connection with the policies of the Western powers vis-à-vis Germany and former Nazi cadres as well as the Soviets’ own post-war persecution of ‘collaborators’, anti-Soviet elements and nationalists especially from Ukraine, the Baltic States and elsewhere (Hirszowicz, 1993: 32). The Soviet media reported the Nuremberg trials and many journalists made references to Jewish fate in their articles. In the reports on the Manstein’s trial, the murder of Jews and Roma was quoted from the indictment in authoritative official Soviet newspapers *Правда (Pravda)* and *Известия (Izvestia)* of September 11, 1949. Newspaper *Новое время (Novoe vremia)*, issue 13 of 1952 and issue 2 of 1953 mentioned the destruction of over 5 million Jews and put the Jews at the head of the list of nations who suffered from Nazi extermination policies. Later, in the 1960s, the Soviet media gave much space to the Eichmann case from the moment of Adolf Eichmann’s capture to his execution two years later in Israel and wrote a lot about the hunt for major Nazi criminals such as Martin Bormann, Josef Mengele, Franz Stangl, and others, and in this context even found good words for Simon Wiesenthal (Gitelman, 1997: 19).

Therefore, one might conclude that there was no complete silence about the Jewish victims of Nazi extermination policies in the Soviet Union, but the general pattern was to avoid to talk separately about the genocide against the Jews and to mention the Jewish origins of many victims. With some exceptions, nothing was said about the nationality of

the victims and general phrases like ‘expulsion and resettlement of inhabitants according to nationality’, ‘execution of civilians’ or ‘killings of people’ were used in many early post-war Soviet works.

## **The Controversy over Monument at Baby Yar**

---

Babi Yar was the site close to Kiev where more than 100.000 of the city’s inhabitants including almost 34.000 Jews were shot in September of 1941. For many years no monument was placed there to commemorate this tragic event, there were plans to turn this site into a park and a stadium. Public support for the erection of monument began to mount after the protest by Soviet writer Viktor Nekrasov in 1959 and a famous poem “*Бабу́й Яр*” (Babi Yar) by Soviet poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko published in 1961. Famous Soviet composer Dmitry Shostakovich included the poem in his Symphony No. 13. These artistic and musical pieces by Soviet intellectuals attracted world attention to the problem and became a sensation, because they revealed for the first time that Soviet society was not free of anti-Semitism and demonstrated that some intellectuals were uncomfortable with the commemoration (or 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” (Gitelman, 1996: 20). Despite the fact that more than 30 per cent of victims killed by the Nazis in Babi Yar were the Jews there was no any reference to Jewish tragedy.

## **National Historiographies in the 1960s – 70s**

---

Some changes in the attitude and in history-writing about WWII in the Soviet Union occurred in late 1960s – 70s. Several volumes of documents were published in the 1960s where more references were made to Jewish sufferings. For example, a documentary collection on Belarus titled “Преступления немецко-фашистских оккупантов в Белоруссии, 1941 – 1944” (The Crimes of the German-Fascist Occupiers in Belorussia, 1941 – 1944) included, among others the order establishing the ghetto in Minsk, descriptions of Germans killing Jews wantonly, mass murders of Jews in Brest-Litovsk area, and the extermination of the Jews in Pinsk, a German report on the resistance of one of the condemned men, and a photograph of Jews being herded into the Grodno ghetto. The origins, structure and purpose of the ghettos were explained highlighting that the Nazi created ghettos in occupied territories and turned them into open-air camps for the mass annihilation of the Jewish population (Lipilo, 1965: 24-25, 28, 56-58, 231, 397).

The study of Estonia during WWII titled “Эстонский народ в Великой Отечественной войне Советского Союза, 1941 – 1945” (Estonian People in the Great Patriotic war of the Soviet Union, 1941 – 1945) presented a sympathetic account of Jewish suffering during the Holocaust. In addition, unlike many other studies, this work mentioned Jewish participation in the armed resistance struggle against the Nazis. It also referred to the German’s robbery of pieces of art and other treasures in private Jewish collections, and quoted the German report about ‘the total liquidation of the Jews’ as the explanation why there were no more Jews in Estonia. Anti-Semitic feelings among some Estonians and their collaboration with the Nazis in the persecution of the Jews is also discussed quite

frankly. The editor stated that implementing their monstrous racial theories, the German fascists and their collaborators in Estonia exterminated almost every Jew and Gypsy (Lentzmann, 1973: 437). However, there is a suspicion that the book was so frank about local Estonian collaboration in the Holocaust as a result of Soviet propaganda attempt to denounce other non-Russian (Estonian) people.

One of the most popular three volume works by Soviet novelist, play-writer and frequent participant in media features on the war Sergey Smirnov referred several times to the suffering of the Jews as victims of Nazism. He stated: “for the Nazis, all people, all nations, aside from the Germans, were inferior and superfluous inhabitants of this earth... the first among these ‘inferior’ nations that would have to disappear were the Jews. The Germans left them no choice – this nation was to be completely exterminated. In all countries captured by the Hitlerite armies the extermination of the Jews was carried out on an unprecedented scale... Millions of people of Jewish nationality or with a tinge of Jewish blood became victims of mass shootings, were burned in crematoria or asphyxiated in the gas chambers and trucks. Whole neighbourhoods were turned into Jewish ghettos and were burned to the ground with their thousands of inhabitants who wore the yellow six-pointed star, the compulsory badge for Jews in lands occupied by the Germans” (Smirnov, vol. 1, 1973: 32).

Smirnov continued by describing testimonies of people of Kiev who remembered “how endless columns of Jews passed on the way to being shot at Babi Yar. Prisoners at Auschwitz, Majdanek, Treblinka remember how thousands of groups of Jews from Poland, Hungary, the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, France and Holland passed through the gas chambers in an endless convoy of death and how piles of bodies lay at the ovens of the crematoria” (Smirnov, vol. 1, 1973: 331). He also wrote about the persecution of Jews in Ukraine and Hungary, discussed the huge concentration of Jews in the Budapest ghetto and their deportation, and described the terrible fate of those who lived behind the barbed wire of innumerable ghettos and camps. Smirnov exemplified his descriptions with the story of a ten year old boy from western Belarus – Roman Levin, who until the war and occupation had been simply a Soviet school boy, a pioneer, who suddenly learned that he was a Jew and only because of that he could be insulted, beaten and even killed without impunity. He managed to escape Brest ghetto and was hidden by a devout Polish Catholic woman who was later shot by Germans when the Gestapo discovered her support to partisans (Smirnov, vol. 1, 1973: 332). Other Soviet writers who acknowledged a special fate for Jews in WWII included Anatoly Kuznetsov in his documentary novel “*Бабий Яр. Роман-документ*” (Babi Yar: A Document in the Form of a Novel) [4] and the Soviet Jewish writer Anatoly Rybakov in his novel “*Тяжёлый песок*” (Heavy Sand).

Important characteristic of many Soviet works that discussed the Nazi genocide against the Jews was that they consistently featured certain themes that served a didactic political purpose. These themes included: gentiles (Russians, Belarusians, Ukrainians, especially workers and poor peasants) frequently rescued Jews in occupied territories and their heroic support was fundamental for Jewish survival; there was much solidarity and cooperation among all nationalities against the Nazis; and the only collaborators with the Nazis were scarce number of fascists, anti-Soviet elements and betrayers of their

motherland. For example, the well-known writer Boris Polevoy claimed that local non-Jews “stubbornly opposed the Nazi murders of the Jews and Jewish families were hidden and assisted” (Polevoj, 1967: 26).

## **Soviet Unwillingness to Acknowledge Jewish Heroism**

---

However, even if some Soviet works acknowledged that Jews were the main victims of Nazism, they completely avoided references to Jews as resistance fighters and heroes and generally downplayed their role in the armed resistance struggle against the German invaders. For example, Smirnov, when describing the defenders of the Brest fortress pointed out the nationality of all heroes except of one – a Jew Efim Fomin, who was described as “the renowned Soviet commissar, a hero and a true son of the Communist Party, one of the chief organizers and leaders of the legendary defense” (Smirnov, vol. 3, 1973: 32). Colonel Dmitry Medvedev – the leader of the partisan movement in western Russia and Ukraine, the hero of the Soviet Union, who accepted Jewish survivors into his group, also preferred to refrain from mentioning ethnic origin of Jewish partisans he described in his memoirs and various books.[5] He also never mentioned a problem of anti-Semitism in the armed forces and among the partisan groups. We can only speculate on true reasons why Soviet writers described Jewish martyrdom, but ignored Jewish heroism: was it an official policy, a compromise they reached with censors, or just an accidental choice made by the authors themselves?

Gitelman argues that the same problem arose not only in regard to academic works and novels, but also in connection with museum exhibitions. For example, the seventeen year old Jewish partisan Masha Bruskina, who was hanged by the Nazis in Minsk, was identified as an ‘unknown partisan’ in Minsk Museum of the Great Patriotic War, despite the fact that she was identified by her relatives and other testimonies. According to Gitelman, the refusal by the authorities to identify her by name and nationality was seen by some Jews as a deliberate refusal to acknowledge Jewish heroism (Gitelman, 1997: 309).

Following the survey of Soviet literature such as academic publications, textbooks, documentary novels, media reports and observing public commemorations such as the erection of monuments and museum exhibitions one may conclude that the Holocaust and Jewish suffering was not denied or completely erased from Soviet history books and memory of Soviet Jews and non-Jews, but it has been adapted and rewritten within the confines of a conforming ideological narrative.

---

**Dr. Olga Baranova** is an EURIAS Junior Fellow at the Institute for Human Sciences (IWM) in Vienna (2014 – 2015). She also teaches contemporary history at Gonzaga University in Florence. She studied European, Russian and international history at the European University Institute (EUI) in Florence, Central European University (CEU) in Budapest and Belarusian State Pedagogical University in Minsk.

---

*Works Cited:*

- Fox, Thomas C. "The Holocaust under Communism" in Dan Stone (ed.) "The Historiography of the Holocaust", Palgrave Mcmillan, 2004.
- Gitelman, Zvi. "Politics and the Historiography of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union" in Zvi Gitelman (ed.) "Bitter Legacy: Confronting the Holocaust in the USSR", Indiana University Press, 1997.
- Gitelman, Zvi. "The Soviet Union" in David S. Wyman (ed.) "The World Reacts to the Holocaust", The John Hopkins University Press, 1996.
- Hill, Alexander. "The War Behind the Eastern Front. The Soviet Partisan Movement in North –West Russia, 1941 – 1944", Frank Cass, London, 2005.
- Hirszowicz , Lukasz. "The Holocaust in the Soviet Mirror" in Lucjan Dobroszycki and Jeffrey S. Gurock (eds.) "The Holocaust in the Soviet Union. Studies and Sources on the Destruction of the Jews in the Nazi-Occupied Territories of the USSR, 1941 – 1945", M.E. Sharpe, 1993.
- Korey, William. "Down History's Memory Hole: Soviet Treatment of the Holocaust" in Present Tense Vol. 10, Winter, 1983.
- Lentzmann, L.N. et.al. (eds.), "Эстонский народ в Великой Отечественной войне Советского Союза, 1941 – 1945" (Estonian People in the Great Patriotic war of the Soviet Union, 1941 – 1945), Tallin: Eesti Raamat, 1973.
- Lipilo, P.P. and Romanovskij, V.F. (eds.) "Преступления немецко–фашистских оккупантов в Белоруссии, 1941 – 1944" (The Crimes of the German-Fascist Occupiers in Belorussia, 1941 – 1944), Minsk, 1965.
- Ostrowsky, Viktor. "Anti-Semitism in Byelorussia and its Origins: Material for Historical Research and Study of the Subject", London, 1960.
- Polevoj, Boris. *Doctor Vera*, SH n. 3, Moscow, 1967.
- Redlich, Shimon (ed.) "War, Holocaust and Stalinism", New York: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1995.
- Smirnov, Sergey. "Собрание сочинений" (Collection of Essays), 3 volumes, Moscow, Molodaia gvardia, 1973.

---

*Notes:*

[1] The statistics on a number of war casualties in the Soviet Union (both military and civilians) vary to a great extent and still remain arguable among historians. In 1946 Josef Stalin stated that Soviet war losses were 7 million, in 1961 Nikita Khrushchev revealed that Soviet war losses during WWII were at least 20 million dead. Sergei Maksudov – a Russian demographer living in the west, estimated Soviet war losses at between 25 and

27.4 million. An official report published by the Russian Academy of Science in 1993 estimated total Soviet population losses of 26.6 million both civilians and military, with military dead at 8.7 million.

[2] Mark Kupovetsky mentioned the number of 2,733,00 Soviet Jews who died during the war. This figure includes natural deaths and those due to harsh conditions even in the unoccupied areas. See Mark Kupovetsky, “Estimation of Jewish losses in the USSR during World War II” // *Jews in Eastern Europe* (24), Summer 1994, p. 2. Mordechai Altshuler asserts that number of Jewish Holocaust victims in the Soviet Union fluctuate between 2.5 million and 3.3 million. See Mordechai Altshuler, *Soviet Jewry since the Second World War*, New York, Greenwood Press 1987, p. 4. Cited in Gitelman, “Politics and the Historiography of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union”, 1997, p. 35.

[3] The English version is *The Black Book*, translated by J. Glad. And J.S. Levine, New York, Holocaust Library 1981.

[4] Anatoly Kuznetsov, “*Бабий Яр. Роман–документ*” (Babi Yar: A Document in the Form of a Novel), Moscow, 1966 (censored version), in 1969 Kuznetsov defected from the USSR to the UK. Full uncensored version appeared in 1973 and was published by New York publishing house Posev.

[5] See for example Dmitry Medvedev, “*Это было под Ровно*” (It Happened Near Rovno) 1948, “*Сильные духом*” (Strong in Spirit) 1951 and “*Отряд идет на Запад*” (The Battalion goes West) 1948. No special reference to Jewish origin of many partisans was made in these works.

---

*Preferred citation:* Baranova, Olga. 2015. Politics of Memory of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union. In: Dimensions of Modernity. The Enlightenment and its Contested Legacies, ed. P. Marzewski, S. Eich, Vienna: IWM Junior Visiting Fellows' Conferences, Vol. 34.