

Soviet Russia's Reaction to the Nazi Holocaust and the Implications of the Suppression of Jewish Suffering

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ABSTRACT

The Holocaust remains a salient topic today, but its legacy has been unevenly shaped across time and space. This paper seeks to answer the following question: How did the liberating Red Army and Soviet authorities hinder the spreading of awareness of the Nazi concentration camps, and how did that action impact the Holocaust's legacy? Primary and secondary sources reveal the Soviet authorities' motives behind purposeful suppression to have been ideological and fear-driven and had a detrimental impact on Holocaust legacy and its current discourse. The death camps Treblinka, Bełżec, Sobibór, and Majdanek are deservedly addressed as the focus for Holocaust discussion here because their explicit purpose was to kill. These camps are not given enough attention in current general discourse because Auschwitz, not the death camps, retains the focus. This paper's call to action intends to change that so as not to let these death camps fall out of memory. Considering the rise of nationalist and populist movements in Europe today, it is vital to keep alive the notion that the slope from minor prejudice to holocaust is a slippery one.

Keywords: Holocaust, liberation, Soviets, Jews, Reinhard, camps, suppression, communism, the Final Solution

La reacción de la Rusia soviética al holocausto nazi y las implicaciones de la represión del sufrimiento judío

RESUMEN

El Holocausto sigue siendo un tema destacado hoy en día, pero su legado se ha formado de manera desigual en el tiempo y el espacio. Este documento busca responder a la siguiente pregunta: ¿Cómo el Ejército Rojo liberador y las autoridades soviéticas impidieron

la difusión de la conciencia sobre los campos de concentración nazis, y cómo esa acción impactó el legado del Holocausto? Fuentes primarias y secundarias revelan que los motivos de las autoridades soviéticas detrás de la supresión intencional de haber sido ideológicos y motivados por el miedo y haber tenido un impacto perjudicial en el legado del Holocausto y su discurso actual. Los campos de exterminio de Treblinka, Belżec, Sobibór y Majdanek se abordan merecidamente como el foco de la discusión sobre el Holocausto aquí porque su propósito explícito era matar. Estos campos no reciben suficiente atención en el discurso general actual porque Auschwitz, no los campos de exterminio, mantiene el foco. El llamado a la acción de este documento tiene la intención de cambiar eso para no dejar que estos campos de exterminio se pierdan de memoria. Considerando el auge de los movimientos nacionalistas y populistas en Europa hoy, es vital mantener viva la noción de que la pendiente del prejuicio menor al holocausto es resbaladiza.

Palabras clave: Holocausto, liberación, soviéticos, judíos, Reinhard, campamentos, represión, comunismo, la solución final

苏维埃俄国对纳粹大屠杀的反应及 犹太人被折磨压迫的意义

摘要

大屠杀在如今依旧是一个重要话题，但其遗留问题却没有在跨越时空的过程中被均衡研究。本文试图回答下列问题：解放红军与苏联政府如何阻碍了纳粹集中营意识的扩散，此举如何影响了大屠杀的遗留问题？原始资料与次级资料显示，苏联政府对意识故意压制一事背后的动机是由思想和恐惧所驱动的，并且对大屠杀遗留问题及其当前话语产生了不良影响。特雷布林卡、贝尔赛克、索比堡、马伊达内克死亡营在此处值得作为大屠杀探讨重点进行研究，因为其明确目的是杀戮。这些集中营在当前的普遍话语中没有受到足够的关注，因为保持关注的是奥斯威辛集中营，而不是（这些）死亡营。本文对相关行动的呼吁旨在改变这一现象，以期不让这些死亡营被记忆遗忘。鉴于当前欧洲民族主义者和民粹主义运动的兴起，值得保持的观念是，从少数偏见到大屠杀这一倾斜过程是危险的。

关键词：大屠杀，解放，苏联人，犹太人，莱因哈德，集中营，压迫，共产主义，最终解决方案

A great many accounts about a great many things litter the historical record of the Second World War. One of the aspects of the war that retains contemporary relevance is the study of the Holocaust—more specifically, the splintered legacy that developed after the discovery of Nazi concentration camps. When Auschwitz is mentioned, the general public has a basic understanding of what it is, but it is fair to say that there is not nearly enough general awareness and understanding regarding the death camps. Although Auschwitz was larger and claimed the highest number of lives for a single camp by the war's end, the explicit purpose of the death camps should warrant increased discussion, whether among academics or the masses at large, especially in the United States; it cannot all be boiled down to just Auschwitz.

Given that the Red Army discovered these camps in 1945, it fell to them to document and publicize the camps' existence. However, Stalin aimed to suppress knowledge of the camps upon their liberation, and specifically of the Jewish suffering that occurred there. This paper seeks to answer the following question: how did the liberating Red Army and the Soviet authorities hinder the spreading of awareness of the Nazi concentration camps, and how did that action impact the Holocaust's legacy? Soviet motives behind purposeful suppression were ideological and fear-driven and had a detrimental impact on Holocaust legacy and its current discourse.

The exploration of this topic resulted from a comment in the Introduction of Vasily Grossman's wartime memoir *A Writer at War* (2005). Grossman's editor, Antony Beevor, noted that when the Red Army first learned of the camps, Grossman was determined to discover as much as he could about the Holocaust, a subject that the Soviet authorities tried to suppress. Grossman, a talented writer with a troubled past, quickly "proved to be the most perceptive and honest eyewitness of the Soviet frontlines between 1941 and 1945."¹ He held no affection for Stalin, but he also did not make waves that would arouse the wrath of the Party or the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs or NKVD. The fact that someone who genuinely reported on war events sought to bypass (or even disregard) Soviet policy regarding the Holocaust proves the dire need for that effort to be studied.

The Holocaust targeted mostly Jews, and so the event was suppressed in the Soviet Union primarily because there was also plenty of prejudice against Jews in the Soviet Union and Stalin wanted to correlate the two. The Soviet leader did not want to have his anti-Semitic policy likened to that of Hitler's, so instead he steered the authorities to emphasize Soviet heroism and glory in defending the Motherland against the fascist invaders. In the initial years after 1945, "under the influence of 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 [political] propaganda The nar-

rative of the War was masterfully used by the authorities for the formation of a unifying Soviet identity.”²

When Stalin died in 1953, Khrushchev’s anti-Semitic policies grew more discreet compared to Stalin’s tactic of overt physical and propagandist assault. “Although the worst excesses subsided after the death of Stalin ... the inhibitions, taboos, and distortions regarding ‘Jewish’ matters lingered for decades in the Soviet Union.”³ This era of the Soviet suppression of Jewish suffering formed a gap in Holocaust discourse (especially in comparison to the West) and developed a tainted legacy. Understanding how and why it happened can not only lead to a better understanding of Soviet policy, but also help form a concerted effort to fill in the gap it left.

Concentration Camps in Question

Auschwitz, Treblinka, Bełżec, Sobibór, and Majdanek were in Nazi-occupied territory until their liberation. Treblinka, Bełżec, and Sobibór were the manifestation of the Operation Reinhard objectives: initially prisoners (e.g., Poles and communist political prisoners) would be sent to work in an effort to bolster the intended economic colonization of the territory in and around Poland, but these camps very quickly took on the role of killing centers. From the Nazi perspective, *Reichsführer-SS* Himmler was “careful not to issue written orders on the extermination of the Jews ... for fear of the verdict of history. [Verbal orders alone set]

Operation Reinhard into motion.”⁴ The lack of documentation handicapped any effort for the Holocaust and the Jews’ struggle within it to survive posterity; from the Soviet perspective, this only aided their attempts to suppress knowledge of it within Union borders.

Sent from ghettos in large cities (and later transferred from overwhelmed *Einsatzgruppen* in the east), Jews and others who suffered arrived at these camps to meet their doom. Treblinka was positioned a little over sixty miles northeast of Warsaw and in operation between the summer of 1942 and fall of 1943. The guards and staff maintained the ruse that the camp was merely a transit hub to other camps. “The Jews who arrived at Treblinka were misled about the true nature of the camp. David Novodvorski, from Warsaw, who was taken to Treblinka and escaped during the first week of August 1942, related, after returning to the ghetto, that when his transport had first arrived in the camp, no one was suspicious. Only after two days did he discover its true purpose.”⁵

Bełżec was almost 200 miles southeast of Warsaw and was in operation throughout 1942. With “secrecy and deception of the victims”⁶ as “cornerstones of [the] extermination process,” deportees who arrived could not escape their fate. *Reichsminister* Goebbels noted in his diary on March 27, 1942, that “the former Gauleiter of Vienna [Globocnik], who is to carry [the measure of liquidation and forced labor in the Lublin district] through, is doing it with considerable circumspec-

tion and according to a method that does not attract too much attention. Fortunately, a whole series of possibilities presents itself for us in wartime that would be denied us in peacetime. We shall have to profit by this.”⁷ The relative organization and discretion with which camp commandants operated their killing centers certainly contributed to a low profile concerning what truly occurred there. This lack of information helped the Soviet suppression: if no one knew what really happened, then no one could spread awareness about it.

Sobibór, which lay around 150 miles east of Warsaw, carried out its first “routine mass exterminations” in May 1942. SS *Oberscharführer* Kurt Bolender, who served in Sobibor, testified as to the killing process:

Before the Jews undressed, *Oberscharführer* [Hermann] Michel [deputy commander of the camp] made a speech to them. On these occasions, he used to wear a white coat to give the impression [that he was] a physician. Michel announced to the Jews that they would be sent to work. But before this they would have to take baths and undergo disinfection so as to prevent the spread of diseases After undressing, the Jews were taken through the so-called *Schlauch*. They were led to the gas chambers not by the Germans but by Ukrainians.⁸

Bolender’s account is just one instance of compliance in the Holocaust by non-Germans/non-Nazis. Another was involved in a mass shooting of

more than five hundred Jewish men, women, and children by Ukrainian nationalists in the village of Varvarivka in November 1941. Authorities erected a memorial in commemoration of this event. “According to this late Soviet-era memorial, ‘German-fascist invaders’ killed ‘peaceful citizens’ at this spot in 1941. There was no reference to the Jewish identity of the victims.”⁹ The memorial’s wording is clear, physical proof of the Soviet suppression of Holocaust facts, hiding the Soviet Jewish experience of those tragic times from public knowledge.

Auschwitz lay about 200 miles south of Warsaw and was the scene of the execution of well over one million people between 1940–45. Modeled on the previous three camps in terms of infrastructure and eventually functionality (after the killing process had been tested and innovated at the Reinhard camps), Auschwitz grew into a massive complex. Given that this camp was not demolished and erased from physical memory like the others, it was unofficially adopted as center of all Holocaust suffering. For Westerners, this included anyone who opposed the Third Reich, but most notably Jews. For those in the Soviet Union, this excluded Jews from the list. With fewer sites to physically remind and spark curiosity among the public east of the Iron Curtain, the Soviet authorities had a relatively easier time with their suppressive efforts. Despite this, however, those entering Auschwitz still experienced something they knew was dark and foreboding.

“Liberation” of the Death Camps

When the Nazi war machine invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, orders were carried out with the understanding that all communists (and especially Soviet commissars) were to be treated ruthlessly and without fear of the penalties resulting from international law violations. German soldiers understood the enemy to behave barbarically and inhumanely; their response could then only be to treat any subhuman opposing Nazi advances “immediately and with maximum severity.”¹⁰ This response resulted in atrocities, rapes, and summary murder of all types of individuals the Germans encountered: men, women, children; Poles, Ukrainians, Russians; and anyone considered a threat to the Reich.

After the German retreat following Stalingrad and Kursk in early 1943 and the increasing momentum of the Soviet push toward Berlin, these atrocities were repaid on German civilians in the conquered territories (and eventually in Germany proper). When it came to the concentration camps, these atrocities sometimes continued depending on the circumstance. The notion of prisoners going from one hell to another (i.e., rape, murder, and oppression of various kinds by those who freed them) is why the word “liberation” in this section’s heading is in quotations. This reality partially fueled the Soviet hatred of the Germans while simultaneously acting as a justifiable retaliation for atrocious actions against the Soviet people (Jews excluded).

Returning to Grossman’s experience with the advancing Red Army, the Soviets discovered massacres in the Ukraine and Poland by summer 1944—but it was later when they found “even more ghastly revelations.” Majdanek, a work camp-turned-extermination camp and the first to be discovered by the Red Army, was liberated¹¹ and deemed an appropriate case study for Soviet propaganda “since many non-Jewish Poles and Russian prisoners” had suffered there. No specific mention of Jewish suffering was made, playing right into the authorities’ ideological and propagandist agenda.¹² Historian Richard Overy states: “They found around 1,000 sick, emaciated prisoners. The Jewish inmates had been taken westward on one of the hundreds of death marches. Most of those who remained were Soviet prisoners of war ... Maidanek [sic] was given wide publicity among the troops. By the time the Red Army reached Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka, those camps had been obliterated by the German authorities, the land ploughed [sic] under and farmed once again.”¹³ The fact that the Soviets found their own people imprisoned and the remains of this camp were intact underscores the sloppiness by the Germans in fully erasing this camp (which was just like the other three death camps) and the opportunity was seized by Soviet authorities to carefully use it to their advantage.

Around the same time, Soviet troops discovered Treblinka farther north. Separated into two camps—Treblinka I for the forced labor of prisoners and Treblinka II for the extermination

of Jews—the relatively small complex grounds were a mere shadow of what the camp was during its prime operation. Grossman points out that despite the camp being physically destroyed, “it was the Red Army that stopped Himmler from [completely] keeping the secret of Treblinka.” Based on interviews and eyewitness accounts from locals and some who escaped, which were “from a variety of sources” and “consistent in every detail,” Grossman constructed an understanding of the camp’s inner workings, broken down into “the circles of the Hell of Treblinka.” From the construction of the camp (and the rail spur leading to it) to the demography of those trained into the camp to the process of separating and exterminating new arrivals each day, Grossman “came to believe that what [he] had heard was true.”¹⁴

Part of the reason prisoners escaped from Treblinka and lived to give eyewitness accounts stems from the fact that a prisoner uprising occurred in August 1943. Richard Glazar, a survivor, recounted the uprising led by “prisoner functionaries,”¹⁵ describing the underground network of prisoners who organized and carried out the uprising, the logistics of planning, the gathering of weapons and using them against the guards, and finally escaping the camp and hiding out in a nearby pond until it was clear to move on.¹⁶ Others made it out after their stint at the work camp (Treblinka I) ended or they escaped the train prior to its arrival at the camp. Many accounts were ignored or held in disbelief; it would not be until the Allies liberated more camps that news spread

(especially in the West), revealing what occurred inside them.

When Grossman entered the grounds that constituted Treblinka, he recorded what he experienced with such vivid description:

We enter the camp and walk on the ground of Treblinka...The earth is throwing out crushed bones, teeth, clothes, papers. It does not want to keep secrets and the objects are climbing out from the earth, from its unhealing wounds. Here they are, half ruined by decay, shirts of the murdered people, their trousers, shoes, cigarette cases ... a child's shoes with red pompons ... lace underwear, corsets, bandages. And a little further on, heaps of plates and dishes have made their way to the surface. And further on—it is as if someone's hand is pushing them up into the light, from the bottomless bulging earth—emerge the things that the Germans had tried to bury, Soviet passports, notebooks with Bulgarian writing in them, photographs of children from Warsaw and Vienna ... a book of poetry, food ration cards from Germany A terrible smell of putrefaction hangs over everything, the smell that neither fire, nor sun, rains, snow and winds could dispel We walk on ... and suddenly we stop. Some yellow hair, wavy, fine and light, glowing like brass, is trampled into the earth, and blonde curls next to

it, and then heavy black plaits on the light-coloured [sic] sand, and then more and more Everything is true. The last, lunatic hope that everything was only a dream is ruined And one feels as if one's heart could stop right now, seized with such sorrow, such grief, that a human being cannot possibly stand it.¹⁷

It surely took quite some time for the experience to set in, not just for Grossman but for those with him. As the late Treblinka survivor Samuel Willenberg said, "Here [the corpses of the gassed prisoners] were buried in enormous ditches It is difficult to believe that such a crime could have been carried out within such a small space [of 200 meters by 300 meters] It is difficult The scale of the crime is beyond normal comprehension."¹⁸

An uprising similar to the one in Treblinka occurred at Sobibór on October 14, 1943. Instrumental to the uprising were "blacksmiths, cobblers, cabinetmakers, and tailors"—very similar to the skilled prisoner functionaries at Treblinka. These few men, led by a Soviet Jewish officer named Alexander Pechersky whose unit was encircled and captured by the Nazis in October 1941, organized a concerted and discreet killing spree against their SS captors:

At 4pm, the conspirators in Camp I acted. Pechersky monitored everything from the cabinetmakers' shop. The prisoners relied on the punctuality of the Nazis and on their greed and vanity. After inviting him to try on a new coat in

the tailors' workshop, Alexander Shubayev, one of Pechersky's fellow soldiers, dispatched Johann Niemann, the SS deputy commandant, with an ax-blow to the head. His body was pushed under a bed. A second Nazi followed fifteen minutes later. He, too, was slain. Shortly thereafter, Lerner and Arkady Wajspapir finished off Siegfried Graetschus, who directed Sobibór's Ukrainian contingent. Another Nazi succumbed while he looked at a pair of boots. In all, about a dozen SS met their end through these ruses. Runners kept everyone informed of the progress made Just before 4:30, the insurgents cut the telegraph and telephone cables, preventing the remaining Germans from notifying their superiors When the Kapo called everyone to line up for roll-call near the front of the camp, no SS men showed up. Then, the inmates realized what was at hand and became restless ... scores of Jewish prisoners surged toward the front gate. German and Ukrainian fire claimed many of them before they could get to it. The Soviets, including Pechersky, and those who had hidden arms shot back. Some frantically cut through the barbed wire. Others, far more desperate, climbed the fence and took their chances with the mines the Germans had planted outside the wire. After getting through the fence, Pechersky recalled, he ran across

an open field before getting to the treeline ... Pechersky ordered his men to move only at night. They walked single-file and never uttered a word to one another. During the day, they concealed themselves as best they could ... 300 of them—and that number leaps off the page—escaped during the commotion at Sobibor. Leydesdorff believes 184 could not escape. Scores of prisoners came so close to making it out. The Germans mowed down 41 of them during the uprising. 58 out of the 300 who escaped lived to see the war's end. Terribly, some of those who got to the forest, feeling weary and exhausted, returned to Sobibor—and to certain death. Still, 58 survived.

Killing actions at Sobibór “ceased right after the uprising. SS men killed those inmates who had not escaped. Subsequently, on Himmler’s orders, they dismantled Sobibor’s killing facilities, bulldozing much of what had been there and planting trees to cover the site.”¹⁹

The Soviets found the camp plowed over just like Treblinka, and a Ukrainian family occupied the farmhouse built there. It eventually became known that Jews were prisoners at Sobibór, but again the Soviet authorities did not dwell on this aspect. The soldiers learned that “crematoria were never installed at Sobibor. Men and women living near the camp remembered the skies illuminated, at night, by the burning of corpses in mass graves.

The infernal stench [was overwhelming].”²⁰ The corpses were all labeled as non-Jews when word began to spread within the Soviet Union.

Bełżec experienced much the same fate as the other Reinhard camps: the Nazis attempted to cover up all traces of it by destroying its structures and plowing over the earth to make farmland. Liberation came in July 1944, and Red Army soldiers gradually discovered more about what happened. Survivors—who could “be counted on one hand”²¹—that escaped and found refuge nearby or had come forth after the war were the only ones who could give an account of what happened. Their stories may have found more traction in Western media, but there were too few that were too powerless when sharing their experiences in the Soviet Union.

Lastly, Auschwitz was liberated by Red Army troops in January 1945, just months before the war ended in Europe. Soviet soldier Ivan Martynushkin commented on his unit’s arrival at the camp: “Only the highest-ranking officers of the General Staff had perhaps heard of the camp ... We knew nothing.” As they searched the camp, Martynushkin and his comrades “noticed people behind barbed wire.” He continues: “It was hard to watch them. I remember their faces, especially their eyes which betrayed their ordeal.” Martynushkin’s unit found “roughly 7,000 prisoners left behind—those too weak or sick to walk. They also discovered about 600 corpses.”²²

Genry Koptev Gomolov was eighteen when he first saw Auschwitz.

“It was cold and gloomy with wet snow falling We saw the barbed wire and we understood it was a camp.” Once inside, he and his comrades “found thousands of wraithlike people laughing and crying, singing and shouting, or simply staring dumbly at their liberators. He saw corpses stacked like cordwood and abandoned before the Nazis could set them on fire. He saw the crematories and the subterranean rooms he later learned were gas chambers. ‘It made a deep impression.’”²³ Mykola Karpenko, a Ukrainian veteran, saw piles of clothes, shoes, piles of human hair and bones, and other items in a central square of the camp. Also, there were “wooden logs ... and dead bodies stacked on top Then another layer of wood, and then again bodies.” When thinking of Auschwitz now, all he feels is “hatred.”²⁴

The notion of the surviving prisoners going from one hell to another as they changed hands from the Nazis to the Soviets usually tends to be overshadowed by the inherent joy of liberation. Ivan Martynushkin explained that he and his fellow Red Army comrades “have not been hailed as heroes,” as the war has faded farther into memory. “Former Soviet satellite countries—including Poland and Baltic states—insist that Red Army troops that liberated Eastern Europe from Nazi totalitarianism merely replaced [Nazi brutality] with a Soviet form.”²⁵

Another account, like many others, is one of “abuse, rape, theft and terrible betrayal.” Helena Citronova and her elder sister, two liberated women

trying to get home to Czechoslovakia, “trudged the roads of Poland by day ... and then sheltered in hedgerows or barns at night. Often, they would share whatever shelter they could find with other women, also newly freed from Nazi camps. They soon discovered that, in the darkness, Red Army soldiers [who were totally drunk and acting like wild animals] would search for women. There were cases where they were raped to death. They strangled them.” On one occasion, Helena found a bicycle and went for a short ride, eventually crossing paths with a Red Army soldier on a motorbike. He dismounted and tried to overtake her. “I kicked and I bit and I screamed and he asked me all the time if I was German. I said: ‘No, I am Jewish from the camp.’ I showed him the number on my arm. And at that moment he recoiled. Maybe he himself was Jewish. I don't know what he was. He turned, stood up and ran.” When hearing this account, it is not too much of a stretch to say that this soldier's recoiling is indicative of the Soviet mindset when it came to Jews, and if that man was not Jewish, then that very well could have been the case.²⁶

At Auschwitz at least, “the Russians were strangely unaffected by what they saw ... despite being friendly to the victims.” Surely, the liberation was “hardly reported in the Soviet Press—on February 2, 1945, there was a small report in *Pravda*, but hardly the coverage [one] would imagine. One reason is that many of the Soviet soldiers who first arrived at Auschwitz had themselves endured unimaginable horrors on the Eastern Front.” To these soldiers,

Auschwitz was “just one more terrible sight in a war already overflowing with atrocity. Soviet liberator Ivan Marty-nushkin added to his account: “I had seen towns destroyed I had seen the destruction of villages. I had seen the suffering of our own people. I had seen small children maimed.”²⁷ Another factor was that the Soviets wanted to make political capital out of the death camps. Soviet Marxist propaganda “downplayed the suffering of the Jews—even though [virtually all of the 1,000,000 killed there] were Jews—in order to claim that the murder factory was an example of fascist capitalism's exploitation of expendable workers In Soviet minds, there was little suggestion that this was genocide, no real belief that the souls they had liberated deserved special sympathy.”²⁸ Despite the intention of freeing the survivors, many viewed the Red Army as an occupying force that replaced National Socialism and extended communist ideology over the region.

Soviet Suppression and Its Legacy

The Soviet authorities took advantage of the reality they faced upon forcing the Nazi armies back to Germany and winning the war with the Americans, British, and liberated French at their side. In terms of the news reaching the public,

nothing so placed the horrors committed by the Third Reich in front of the public in the Western allied nations as clearly as the arrival of their troops at

concentration and labor camps in 1945 Pictures had been printed in the United States and Great Britain In an age when newsreels and magazines like *Life* provided the main visual impressions of events, the pictures of the camps brought reality to the home front But somehow these places seemed far away, even if the numbers murdered in them were [vast].²⁹

When it came time for Allied authorities to put the captured Nazis on trial at Nuremberg, newsreel images proved to be the final nail in the Nazi coffin.

The Soviets found their circumstances improved. Not only did their authorities view the trials as “an expression of the ultimate triumph of the Soviet Union over its bitter enemy, a source of legitimate pride and inspiration,”³⁰ but the trials facilitated the execution of a broader agenda:

From the Soviet perspective, Nazism was not simply evil in itself. It was part of a broader phenomenon and a more lasting enemy—capitalism and ‘capitalism's highest stage,’ imperialism. Soviet ideologues conceived of Nazism and fascism as systems developed by the ruling capitalist classes for the purpose of maintaining their domination and alleviating fundamental economic and social problems of capitalism through the use of violence, nationalism, and aggression³¹.... In 1945 Pravda's chief editor Petr Pospelov explained to Boris

Polevoi, fascism and Nazism were not just matters of the past. They were ‘the quintessence of world imperialism, its extreme manifestation.’ According to the Bulgarian communist leader and a former head of Comintern Georgii Dimitrov whom Boris Polevoi met shortly before his departure for Nuremberg, ‘Nazism is the most dreadful off-spring that imperialism has ever produced ... but perhaps the most rational for modern imperialism.’ Pospelov and Dimitrov were essentially suggesting that in response to new crises of the capitalist system, it would be both natural and rational for capitalists to try to preserve their domination through the creation of new Nazi-style regimes in the West. Such cataclysmic crises, according to the communist worldview, were not only possible—they were inevitable as capitalism was nearing its equally inevitable collapse It seems therefore that from the standpoint of the Soviet leaders, exposing the crimes of the Nazi leadership in great detail could boost the Soviet Union’s stance in its future confrontations with capitalism.³²

This illustrates why Soviet authorities wanted to cover the Nuremberg trials – they wanted to make the event an ideological triumph to round out the military one just months before. With this as the primary Party focus, ignoring

and denying the suffering of any particular group (i.e., Jews) did not matter in the grand scope of communist ideology.

A slew of Soviet journalists covered the trials, but the fact remains that they were “personally approved”³³ by Party leadership. This meant they either were complicit with Party directives or the leadership knew them well enough to expect them to keep their stories in line. The resulting trial news regarding the Jews was censored by the time it reached the Soviet people. Aside from the pervading fear surrounding prohibited free speech, this seems to be the only plausible reason as to why so much attention to the Jews at Nuremberg did not translate into Soviet media.

Stalin struggled with other Allied leaders over Poland’s future, which “he demanded would come under Moscow’s rule, via communist puppets.” The Soviet leader was prepared to see only one narrative, “one in which the Soviet Union had been Hitler’s victim and the brave soldiers of the Red Army had fought back, until victory was declared on the roof of the Reichstag in Berlin. Polish, and Jewish suffering was to have no part in the Soviet narrative.”³⁴

In the postwar Soviet Union, we see what [French philosopher] Paul Ricoeur called ‘organized forgetting’ transformed into a state policy. The Soviet cultivation of its own interpretation of historical memory aimed to conceal the joint Nazi-Soviet responsibility for instigating the war; to hide its crimes against its own citizens and those of other

states; and to replace the memories of individuals and communities with the narrative of the new imagined community—the Soviet people ... the Soviets moved to destroy the institutional and individual memory-bearers. Examples include the dissolution of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, the only representative body for Jews in the USSR, and the execution of its most prominent members ... It deported en masse members of the intelligentsia from the Union's western territories. In all these cases, any attempts at recollection were considered attempts to resist the official narrative and to advance an opposing narrative based upon other values.³⁵

“Although the number of Jewish party leaders remained high in the immediate postwar years [in the Soviet bloc], the percentage of Jews in the state apparatus began to fall after 1948.”³⁶ This Soviet attempt to limit Jewish presence in Soviet society lasted a while longer under Stalin's successors,³⁷ but it was doomed to fail.

A new generation of Soviet Jews “began reawakening to their roots, emboldened by Israel's victory in the Six-Day War in 1967.” Jewish communities in places like Kiev and Riga (which were occupied by the Nazis during the war) saw “gatherings at the killing fields outside of town, where for the first time Kaddish was said for the dead—no longer anonymous ‘victims of fascism.’ This was where the campaign to

allow Soviet Jews to emigrate began, at the sites where Stalin had sought to rewrite history. Two decades later, the Soviet Union ceased to exist” and more Holocaust accounts began to surface.³⁸ In Russia today, “the war is widely understood as an attempt to exterminate above all the Russian people, rather than Jews. Victory is, therefore, proof of the nation's greatness, its moral rectitude, which grants it an open license to define anything it opposes as fascism. It teaches no universal lesson, only a specifically Russian one.”³⁹

Conclusion

Historian Timothy Snyder's book *Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning* (2015) addresses many relevant aspects of this horrendous period in world history, while also touching on the spirit of Holocaust memory. He says that Auschwitz has become a convenient symbol in post-communist Russia today. “If the Holocaust is reduced to Auschwitz, then it can easily be forgotten that the German mass killing of Jews began in places that the Soviet Union had just conquered ... If the Holocaust is identified only with Auschwitz, [the experience of hundreds of thousands of people participating in, witnessing, and being aware of the mass killing process] can be excluded from history and commemoration.”⁴⁰ The camp at Oświęcim indeed claimed the lives of countless millions, mostly Jews, but that was not the only camp to do so.

Some Soviet citizens were “recruited by the Germans for the mass

shootings of Jews” and they “built and guarded the gassing facilities at Treblinka, Belżec, and Sobibór.” Despite this, Soviet propaganda after the war was “helpless to explain how so many people produced by the Soviet system had proven to be useful collaborators in the mass murder of so many other people produced by the Soviet system.” By extension, the reality that this mass killing by Soviets of Soviets (and others) was facilitated and encouraged by “a totally alien system (Nazism)” poses a problem for Soviet communist purists and those who try to whitewash this history.⁴¹

Identifying the Holocaust solely with Auschwitz can also lead to separating “the mass murder of Jews from human choices and actions” and isolating that geographical location from everywhere else that was affected by it. The perimeter of the camp “[seems] to contain an evil that ... extended from Paris to Smolensk.” This evil might manifest itself through images of “mechanized killing, or ruthless bureaucracy, or the march of modernity, or even the endpoint of enlightenment” when one thinks of it. This minimalist approach turns “the murder of children, women, and men [into] an inhuman process,” when in fact it was a very human process. “When the mass murder of Jews is limited to an exceptional place and treated as the result of impersonal procedures, then we need not confront the fact that people not very different from us murdered other people not very different from us at close quarters.”⁴²

We must not repeat the mistakes of the past: we must not suppress, re-

duce, or forget the truth. Until his final breath in 2016, Samuel Willenberg, the last survivor of Treblinka, “urged the world never to forget Treblinka.”⁴³ That urging should extend to include all camps that were part of the Final Solution, whether they have physically survived or not. Former Israeli president Moshe Katsav stated in 2005 that the Allies “‘did not do enough’ to prevent the killing of Jews in World War II” and that the European Union today should “not allow Nazism to live in the imagination of the youth of Europe like some kind of horror show.”⁴⁴ Rather, scholars and authorities should confront that period and its atrocities for what they were and are, not suppressed and ignored for the benefit of ideology.

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Notes

- 1 Vasily Grossman, *A Writer at War: A Soviet Journalist with the Red Army, 1941-1945*, ed. and trans. Antony Beevor and Luba Vinogradova (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), vii-xvii.
- 2 Olga Baranova, "Politics of Memory of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union," *Institute for Human Sciences*, last modified 2015, accessed May 31, 2019, <https://www.iwm.at/publications/5-junior-visiting-fellows-conferences/vol-xxxiv/politics-of-memory-of-the-holocaust-in-the-soviet-union/>. "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." The article goes on to say: "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."
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Yitzhak Arad, *Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka: The Operation Reinhard Death Camps* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 16.
- 5 Ibid., 84.
- 6 Ibid., 68.
- 7 Joseph Goebbels, *The Goebbels Diaries*, ed. Louis P. Lochner (New York: Charter New York, 1948), 175–76.
- 8 Arad, *Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka*, 76.
- 9 Jared McBride, "Ukrainian Holocaust Perpetrators Are Being Honored in Place of Their Victims," *Tablet Magazine*, July 20, 2016, <https://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/208439/holocaust-perpetrators-honored>.
- 10 Ian Kershaw, *Hitler: 1936-1945 Nemesis* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2000), 357–58.
- 11 USC Shoah Foundation, "The Red Army Enters Majdanek," *Facing History*, accessed June 2, 2019, <https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/video/red-army-enters-majdanek>. Bernhard Storch, a Pole who joined the army in Soviet territory and wound up transferring to the Red Army, was among the first to enter Majdanek on July 23, 1944: "We entered very, very carefully ... we opened the doors ... there was a gate ... with (barbed) wires and everything ... we still didn't know it was an extermination camp, nobody told us that ... we thought it was a barracks, military barracks ... we caught four SS people and two Polish collaborators ... we thought [there was] a factory, of course we saw a chimney ... we saw a tremendous amount of ashes, but we still didn't know ... maybe that's industrial waste ... we saw showerheads in the ceiling, we thought that was

water for shower ...” An officer came around eventually and confirmed what the troops had feared, informing them, “That’s where they [prisoners] were gassed.”

12 Grossman, *A Writer at War*, 280–81.

13 Richard Overy, *Russia’s War: A History of the Soviet War Effort, 1941-1945* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 260–61.

14 Vasily Grossman, *The Hell of Treblinka*, ed. Martin Zwickler, trans. Olga Reznik (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2016), 14–31.

15 Miles Lerman Center for the Study of Jewish Resistance, “Treblinka Death Camp Revolt,” *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, accessed June 2, 2019, <https://www.ushmm.org/research/the-center-for-advanced-holocaust-studies/miles-lerman-center-for-the-study-of-jewish-resistance/medals-of-resistance-award/treblinka-death-camp-revolt>. “A group of Jewish prisoners, calling themselves the ‘Organizing Committee,’ [planned] an uprising and mass escape. Composed mainly of the camp’s prisoner functionaries, the Committee included over time former Polish army officer Dr. Julian Chorazycki, ‘camp elder’ Marceli Galewski, former Czech army officer Zelo Bloch, as well as Zev Kurland, kapo at the camp’s ‘hospital,’ and Jankiel Wiernik, a carpenter who worked in the extermination area.”

16 Richard Glazar, *Trap with a Green Fence* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999), 137–46.

17 Grossman, *A Writer at War*, 305–06.

18 *DailyMotion*, “The Nazis, A Warning from History, Part 5: The Road to Treblinka,” last modified in 2012, accessed April 6, 2019, <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/xq34vw>.

19 Jason Dawsey, “Remembering the Sobibor Uprising,” *National WWII Museum - New Orleans*, last updated November 14, 2018, <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/remembering-sobibor-uprising>.

20 Ibid.

21 Doris L. Bergen, *War and Genocide: A Concise History of the Holocaust*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2016), 248–50. An SS man named Kurt Gerstein attempted to sabotage Zyklon-B that was to be shipped from Belżec to Auschwitz; he was partially successful. He also got word out through some connections about the suffering of the Jews, but to no avail: no help came. After the war, he was arrested and charged with war crimes; he died in prison in 1945.

22 Thibault Marchand, “Soviet Veteran Recounts Horrors of Auschwitz Liberation,” *Times of Israel*, January 25, 2015, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/soviet-veteran-recounts-horrors-of-auschwitz-liberation/>.

23 Craig S. Smith, “Liberators and Survivors Recall the Auschwitz that Was,” *New York Times*, January 28, 2005, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/01/28/world/europe/liberators-and-survivors-recall-the-auschwitz-that-was.html>.

- 24 Mykola Karpenko, interview for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, January 27, 2015, <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-world-war-two-auschwitz-soviet-army/26816158.html>.
- 25 Marchand, "Soviet Veteran Recounts Horrors of Auschwitz Liberation."
- 26 Laurence Rees, "Raped by Their Saviours: How the Survivors of Auschwitz Escaped One Nightmare Only to Face Another Unimaginable Ordeal," *Daily Mail*, February 2, 2010, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1247157/How-survivors-Auschwitz-escaped-nightmare-faced-unimaginable-ordeal.html>.
- 27 Ishaan Tharoor, "What a Soviet Soldier Saw When His Unit Liberated Auschwitz 70 Years Ago," *The Washington Post*, January 27, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/01/27/what-a-soviet-soldier-saw-when-his-unit-liberated-auschwitz-70-years-ago/?utm_term=.50d1ef9f9b40.
- 28 Rees, "Raped by Their Saviours."
- 29 Gerhard L. Weinberg, *A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: University Press, 2005), 834.
- 30 Leonid Trofimov, "Soviet Reporters at the Nuremberg Trial: Agenda, Attitude, and Encounters, 1945–46," *Critical History Review* 28, no. 2 (Winter 2010): 49, https://www.academia.edu/12799501/Soviet_Reporters_at_the_Nuremberg_Trials_Agendas_Attitudes_and_Encounters_1945-46.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 49–50. Joseph Stalin argued that "fascism was the offshoot of the profound economic crisis of the capitalist system, an indication that "the ruling classes in the capitalist countries are. [...] zealously destroying or nullifying the last vestiges of parliamentarianism and bourgeois democracy [...] and resorting to openly terrorist methods of maintaining their dictatorship. Soviet court officials in Nuremberg echoed this view when they proclaimed to Robert Jackson that 'Nazism was the child of capitalism.'"
- 32 *Ibid.*
- 33 *Ibid.*, 51.
- 34 Anshel Pfeffer, "The Polish Were Once Victims of Historical Whitewashing, Now They Are Doing the Same," *Haaretz*, January 28, 2018, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/polish-victims-of-the-whitewashing-of-history-are-now-the-perpetrators-1.5767939>.
- 35 Ola Hnatiuk, "How the Soviet Union Suppressed the Holocaust to Fight 'Nationalism,'" *The Odessa Review*, November 16, 2017, <http://odessareview.com/soviet-union-suppressed-holocaust-fight-nationalism/>. Following the war, Soviet authorities "took up the task of 'cleansing' society of 'suspicious' elements. The authorities and secret police conducted systematic and meticulous investigations of the activities of their citizens during the occupation. Those imprisoned by the Nazis had to pass through filtration camp designed by the NKVD (Soviet secret police) before repatriation to the USSR."

- 36 Anne Applebaum, *Iron Curtain: The Crushing of Eastern Europe, 1944–56* (New York: Anchor Books, 2012), 144.
- 37 According to Dawsey’s “Remembering the Sobibor Uprising,” Pechersky, the hero of the Sobibor uprising, “wrote his own account of the events, testified against Ukrainian collaborators on trial in the USSR in 1962, and provided statements to a West German trial of Sobibor perpetrators in 1984. Despite his commitment to communist politics, he felt, with good reason, the Soviet regime disdained him and used the KGB to intimidate him.”
- 38 Pfeffer, “The Polish Were Once Victims.”
- 39 Jeremy Hicks, “Why Doesn’t Russia Make a Big Deal about Its Role in Liberating Nazi Holocaust Death Camps?” *The Conversation*, January 27, 2015, <https://theconversation.com/why-doesnt-russia-make-a-big-deal-about-its-role-in-liberating-nazi-holocaust-death-camps-36538>.
- 40 Timothy Snyder, *Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2015), 208.
- 41 Ibid.
- 42 Ibid., 208–09.
- 43 Dominique Mosbergen, “Last Survivor of Treblinka Nazi Death Camp Dies at 93,” *Huffington Post*, February 22, 2016, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/samuel-willenberg-dead-treblinka-survivor_n_56cacb94e4b0928f5a6c5d1d?guccounter=1.
- 44 Smith, “Liberators and Survivors Recall the Auschwitz that Was.”