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Representation of the Holocaust
in Soviet Literature and Films

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The Holocaust on Soviet Screens:
Charting the Map

Olga Gershenson

Why is there no Russian *Schindler's List*? Regardless of one's opinion about Spielberg's blockbuster, it effectively has become an iconic representation of the Nazi genocide for general audiences in the United States and elsewhere. It is an example of how powerful film can be in shaping the popular imagination and collective memory of the Holocaust.

Historians, film critics, and Jewish Studies scholars have long been interested in the way the Holocaust is mediated in American and European cinema. However, there is very little equivalent research about Holocaust films in Russia. Scholarly engagement with the questions of memory and memorialization of the Holocaust on Russian screens is long overdue. So, again, why is there no Russian *Schindler's List*?

The underlying assumption is that there were no Holocaust movies in the Soviet Union, just as there were few other ways to commemorate the Jewish loss. To a large degree this assumption is correct. Although the Soviets never formulated a clear policy regarding the Holocaust, the tendency was to silence any real discussion. Throughout most of the Soviet era, the silencing mechanism remained the same: the Holocaust was not denied, it simply was not treated as a unique and separate phenomenon.[1] The Holocaust was universalized by subsuming

1   Zvi Gitelman, "Soviet Reactions to the Holocaust, 1945–1991," in Lucian

it as part of the overall Soviet tragedy, with Jewish victims euphemistically labeled "peaceful Soviet citizens."[2] In addition to universalization, there was another, much less explored mechanism of externalization: when crimes against Jews were discussed as such, the events of the Holocaust were placed outside the borders of the Soviet Union, thus avoiding any implication of local bystanders or the need of assuming historic responsibility.[3] In order to silence discussion of the Holocaust, these two mechanisms — universalization and externalization — were used in tandem.

As a result there was no official commemoration of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union — even the word Holocaust was not used. The particular Jewish loss had no name. Nevertheless, this was not the full story: writers, poets, photographers, and artists engaged with the subject even during the most inhospitable social climates. Amazingly, some of their creative output was even published and circulated. As this publication so evocatively demonstrates, it is through arts and literature that the memory of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union was kept alive.

This artistic output includes a number of Soviet films about the Holocaust. In this article I attempt to chart a map of the Holocaust representation (or its absence) in Soviet cinema. This

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* (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1993), p. 7; Zvi Gitelman, "Politics and the Historiography of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union," in Zvi Gitelman, ed., *Bitter Legacy: Confronting the Holocaust in the USSR* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), pp. 14–43.

2   Karel C. Berkhoff, "'Total Annihilation of the Jewish Population': The Holocaust in the Soviet Media, 1941–45," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 10, no. 1 (2009), pp. 477–504; Kiril Feferman, *Soviet Jewish Stepchild: The Holocaust in the Soviet Mindset, 1941–1964* (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, 2009); Yitzhak Arad, "Stalin and the Soviet Leadership: Responses to the Holocaust," in John K. Roth and Elisabeth Maxwell, eds., *Remembering for the Future: The Holocaust in an Age of Genocide*, Volume 1: *History* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 355–370.

3   For a discussion of this phenomenon, see Olga Gershenson, *The Phantom Holocaust: Soviet Cinema and Jewish Catastrophe* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2013), p. 2.

map, as I show, leads naturally to periodization, reflecting a connection between the cinematic production and the policies of the regime.

I. Pre-war Period: The First Films About Nazi Antisemitism, 1934–1940

Paradoxically, the Soviets were ahead of the curve in representing the Holocaust. In 1938, as part of their broader anti-fascist campaign, they were the first in history to make films directly attacking German Fascism. Three of these films, from 1938, specifically exposed Nazi antisemitism and the persecution of Jews: *Professor Mamlock* (dirs. Adolf Minkin and Herbert Rappaport)*, Peat Bog Soldiers* (*Bolotnye soldaty*, dir. Aleksandr Macheret), and *The Oppenheim Family* (*Sem'ia Oppengeim,* dir. Grigorii Roshal).[4] An earlier film that referred to antisemitism in Germany was re-released.

The release of these films at home and abroad practically coincided with the Nazi pogroms, thus making them uncannily timely. The reviews of these films in the newspapers actually appeared on the same pages as reports of the Nazi atrocities and the protests against them.

The three films from 1938 have much in common. The main characters are Jewish doctors or medical professionals, and two of the films, *Professor Mamlock* and *The Oppenheim Family,* feature nearly identical scenes in which the Jewish doctors are kicked out of their clinics by Nazi storm troopers. Yet, all three films offer a somewhat limited perspective on both Jewish identity and the phenomenon of German Nazism. The Jews in these films are stereotypical positive characters in the socialist-

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4   For a close reading of these films, see Gershenson, *The Phantom Holocaust*, pp. 13–29; Thomas Doherty, *Hollywood and Hitler, 1933–1939* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), pp. 189–196; Jonathan Skolnik, "Class War, Anti-Fascism, and Anti-Semitism: Grigori Roshal's 1939 Film *Sem'ia Oppengeim* in Context," in Ian Wallace, *Feuchtwanger and Film* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009), pp. 237–246.

realist mold, while their Jewishness is understated to the point of being expunged. The characters are Jews in name only, with only minimal Jewish characteristics, unless we count as Jewish their medical profession, education, humanism, and glasses. (This representation builds on an earlier tradition of Soviet films critical of local antisemitism — several such films were made in the USSR in the 1920s and 1930s). Yet despite this limited representation, the ugly grimace of Nazi antisemitism was evident in all three films.

Paradoxically, these three movies, like other Soviet anti-fascist films, create an image of Germany in which there is no place for actual fascism. The German working class people are portrayed so positively, in such solidarity with Jews, that it leads the historian Thomas Doherty to ask, "Just where did all those marchers at the Nuremberg rallies come from?"[5] In the Soviet films the German people appeared to be the victims of Nazism, not the perpetrators.

Another ideological pitfall in these films is that their true heroes are not Jews but Communists, and the real conflict is not between Jews and Nazis, but rather between Communists and Nazis. The more progressive Jewish characters join Communists at factories and in the underground (in *Professor Mamlock*), or in prisons and camps (in *The Oppenheim Family* and in *Peat Bog Soldiers*).

But these films are also subversive. They draw parallels between the regimes of Stalin and Hitler. Even though the films are set in Nazi Germany, the images on screen — the food lines, arrests, disappearances, and slave labor in camps — call to mind the realities of Stalin's regime in Soviet Russia. All these situations are externalized — in the same way in which later films will externalize the Holocaust — however, there is no doubt that the plots, while taking place in Germany, were fueled by Jewish anxieties in the Soviet Union.

After the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact was signed in August 1939,

5   Doherty, *Hollywood and Hitler*, p. 193.

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the Soviet policy toward Nazi Germany underwent a complete about-face. All Soviet anti-fascist movies were removed from the screens, including *Professor Mamlock, Peat Bog Soldiers*, and *The Oppenheim Family*. Nevertheless, even in the short time span between their releases and the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, these films were able to educate Soviet Jews about Nazi policies. And even after the movies were no longer shown in theaters, the message stuck. Immediately after Hitler's invasion of the USSR, when the Soviets did not rush to publicize news about pogroms and executions of Jews in the occupied territory, at least some Soviet Jews remembered the lessons they had learned from the Mamlocks and Oppenheims.

Several memoirists and interviewees recall that their families literally owe their lives to these 1938 films.[6] The films taught them not to trust Soviet propaganda and prodded them to escape. Those who did so, survived; those who stayed behind did not. This is a remarkable example of the effect films had on Soviet Jewish life.

II. The War — The First Images of the Holocaust, 1941–1945

Throughout the war there was no consistent policy regarding the discussion of the Holocaust, but the tendency was to silence it.[7] As to cinematic representation of the Holocaust, the silencing was carried out by both universalization and externalization. The silencing intensified over time: if, in the early stages of the war, the Holocaust was a permissible topic (mainly because it was a

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6   See, for instance, Benedict Sarnov, *Nash Sovetskii Novoiaz* (Moscow: Materik, 2002), pp. 345–346; and Mikhail Shulman, "Proshchai Trofimovna," *Mishpokha*, 25, http://mishpoha.org/n25/25a16.shtml. The same stories were told to me by Jewish war veterans and Holocaust survivors at the Holocaust Center in Moscow (May 29, 2009). Altshuler reports similar findings in his interviews with survivors and witnesses ("Escape and Evacuation," p. 84). Hicks references numerous survivors' testimonies about *Professor Mamlock* (*First Filmmakers*, 29).

7   Berkhoff, "'Total Annihilation," pp. 477–504; Feferman, *Soviet Jewish Stepchild*.

matter of foreign policy), from 1943 on, the Jewish character of the Holocaust was increasingly downplayed. Nevertheless, this was merely a tendency. As the historian Karel Berkoff emphasizes, even late in the war there was no formal, top-level decision regarding discussion of the Jewish victims of the Nazis.[8]

Actually, early in the war, a specifically Jewish institution, the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (JAFC), was established in order to fundraise and to rally international support for the Soviet war effort.[9] Naturally, in their activities, the JAFC emphasized the particular position of the Jewish people as targets of Nazi violence, appealing to Jewish solidarity not only in the USSR but throughout the world.

The efforts of the JAFC leaders were widely publicized in various media, including film. A documentary newsreel, from 1941, depicts fiery speeches by Soviet Jewish public figures at the rally against Nazism (*Soiuzkinozhurnal* newsreel no. 84). Moreover, the JAFC even planned to produce a whole cycle of feature films depicting the Jewish fate in the war.[10] These plans did not materialize, but a screenplay by a famous Yiddish writer, David Bergelson, entitled *I Will Live!* (*Ia budu zhit'*, 1942) has been preserved in the JAFC archives.[11] Another screenplay, by Leib Kvitko, has been lost. Both scripts, written before the full scope of the Nazi crimes became known, nevertheless paint a picture of Jewish suffering under the occupation. Of course, these being Soviet texts, they end well — with the liberation by the Red Army and the partisan forces, as Jews and non-Jews fight side by side. Celebration of the so-called internationalist solidarity was part and parcel of the Soviet discourse on things Jewish.[12]

This is the spirit of a short film made early in the war, *A Priceless Head* (*Bestsennaia golova*, 1942, dir. Boris Barnet),

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8 Berkoff, "Total Annihilation," p. 93.
9 For background on the JAFC, see Shimon Redlich, *War, Holocaust, and Stalinism: A Documented Study of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee in the USSR* (Luxembourg: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1995).
10 Gershenson, *The Phantom Holocaust*, pp. 29–30.
11 GARF, *f.* 8114, *op.* 1, *d.* 1090, ll. 163–215.
12 Gershenson, *The Phantom Holocaust*, pp. 31–39.

set in occupied Poland. One of the characters is an old man identified as a Jew by his hasidic dress and a Star of David on an armband. Yet he is not confined to a ghetto, and he is not treated by the Nazis any differently than other Poles. Thus, the film hints at the persecution, but stops short of showing the extermination of Jews, or even the Nazis' antisemitic policies. The Jewish fate in *A Priceless Head* was both externalized and universalized.

As to Soviet wartime newsreels and documentaries, they universalized the Jewish loss or avoided it altogether. For instance, as film scholar Jeremy Hicks showed, the abovementioned 1941 newsreel depicted the Soviet Jewish anti-fascist rally but underplayed the totality of the Nazi plans to exterminate Jewish people. Other newsreels depicting Nazi crimes on the Soviet territories obfuscated the fact that most of the murdered victims were Jews.[13] An award-winning documentary, *Moscow Strikes Back* (*Razgrom nemetskikh voisk pod Moskvoi*, 1942; dirs. Leonid Varlamov and Ilia Kopalin), represents human losses as "Soviet," but its narrative implies Russian national victimhood.[14] Similarly, the wartime documentaries of the celebrated filmmaker Aleksandr Dovzhenko emphasized the Ukrainian identity of the victims, avoiding altogether any mention of the Jewish genocide.[15] Even in the Soviet documentaries depicting the liberation of the death camps Majdanek and Auschwitz, the fact that most of the victims were Jewish was not explicitly mentioned.[16]

Feature films made during the war tell a similar story: Jews, even if marginally present in the original screenplays, were written out of the cinematic narrative of the war. Yet there are some exceptions; although the events of the Holocaust were not depicted on screen, the Jewish war effort was. In the particular Soviet Jewish context, service in the Red Army was indirectly

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13   Jeremy Hicks, *First Filmmakers of the Holocaust: Soviet Cinema and the Genocide of the Jews, 1938–46* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012), pp. 45–64.
14   Ibid., pp. 64–69.
15   Ibid., pp. 107–133.
16   Ibid., pp. 157–185.

connected with the events of the Holocaust. Soviet Jews fought at the fronts as Jews, driven by a desire to avenge their families or communities and motivated to dispel a stigma of Jews as being unfit for military service.

Characters of Jewish Red Army fighters appeared for the first time in the two wartime movies released almost simultaneously in 1943: the heroic military photographer Misha Vainstein in the melodrama *Wait for Me* (*Zhdi menia*, dir. Aleksandr Stolper); and the charming Odessan, Arkadii Dziubin, in the buddy comedy *Two Fighters* (*Dva boitsa*, dir. Leonid Lukov). Both servicemen are presented as unabashedly positive characters, yet their presence is only partial. As winning a character as he is, Vainstein appears only in a subplot, on the margins of the main story. Dzubin is a main character, but the film only hints at his Jewishness, without explicit identification. Still, the mere fact that these Jewish (or possibly Jewish) fighters appeared in such mainstream and popular films was significant.

Even more momentous was the appearance of the film *The Unvanquished* (*Nepokorennye*, 1945), directed by Mark Donskoi. In many ways this movie was an exception to the policy of silencing the discussion of the Holocaust on screen — evidence of Soviet ambivalence about the treatment of the Holocaust, and even confusion as to its cinematic representation.

Remarkably, *The Unvanquished* was not just the first Soviet film that portrayed the events of the Holocaust — it was one of the first Holocaust films worldwide. Its central and most devastating scene depicts a mass execution, which was filmed on location in Babi Yar in Kiev, a place that came to symbolize the Holocaust in the Soviet Union. Although the story of Dr. Fishman (played by a Soviet Yiddish actor, Veniamin Zuskin), who was executed in the ravine, and his young granddaughter, who was saved by a sympathetic Ukrainian family, is only a subplot in a broader narrative, it is undoubtedly the most moving and memorable plot line.[17]

17   For a close reading of the Holocaust subplot in this film, see Gershenson, *The*

The execution scene in *The Unvanquished* created the very first image of the Holocaust on Soviet soil, so called "the Holocaust by bullets." While this depiction was not historically accurate, it was powerful cinematically. At least in this scene, the particular Jewish predicament was neither universalized nor externalized. Alas, as mentioned before, this representation was an exception, not the rule. The rule at the time was that the Jewish victims of the war were increasingly silenced, to the point that on Soviet screens the Holocaust became a mere phantom.

III. Postwar Era: The Black Years, Time of Total Silence, 1946–1955[18]

In the postwar era, as Stalinist policy grew more antisemitic, *The Unvanquished* was removed from the screens and from festival programs. The *Black Book*, a collection memorializing the Holocaust on Soviet soil, was destroyed.[19] Many Jewish public figures were arrested, persecuted, or killed. During this dark era, Jewish subjects, including the Holocaust, were off limits. Indeed, this was the only time in Soviet history that not a single feature film even attempted to represent or memorialize Jewish victims or heroes. With regard to documentary films, Roman Karmen's *The Judgment of the Peoples* (*Sud narodov*, 1946)*, which reported on the Nuremberg trial, silenced the Holocaust almost entirely. Yet this was the only cinematic document from that time that at least mentioned the Nazi persecutions of Jews.[20]

Phantom Holocaust, pp. 40–57. For an analysis of other plot lines, see Elena Baraban, "Semeinyi krug: traktovka rodstva, evreev i voennoplennyh v stalinskom kino o voine," *Ab Imperio*, 3 (2009), pp. 473–497.

18 I borrow the term "black years" from Yehoshua Gilboa, who originally used it to refer to the late Stalinist rule in 1948–1953; see his *The Black Years of Soviet Jewry* (Boston: Little Brown, 1971).

19 On the *Black Book*, see Joshua Rubenstein and Ilya Altman, eds., *The Unknown Black Book: The Holocaust in the German-Occupied Soviet Territories* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 2008.

20 Hicks, pp. 197–204.

IV. The Khrushchev Thaw and Beyond: The Wide Range of Holocaust Representations, 1956–1968

Stalin died in 1953, and Khrushchev's rule heralded in a period of relative liberalization in politics and culture, which became known as the Thaw. In reality, the new liberalization was rather limited, and the fresh winds of the Thaw were cooled by familiar freezing. In that uncertain atmosphere, as filmmakers constantly tried to navigate the treacherous terrain of the permissible and the forbidden, scores of significant films were actually made, and more scripts were in development. Several of them dealt with the Holocaust.

The moment in 1964, when Khrushchev was ousted, marked the end of the Thaw, even though the first signs of the changes in Soviet domestic policy had been noticed earlier. Filmmaking, especially in the Soviet Union, is a slow process, and the industry took a long time to respond to the changes. This is why the first films of the Thaw were made only in the late 1950s, and the last ones as late as 1968.

Soldiers (*Soldaty*), directed by Aleksandr Ivanov in 1956, was the first film of the Thaw, made in the spirit of de-Stalinization. *Soldiers* is not a Holocaust film, but one of its main characters is a Jewish soldier — or rather an officer. Farber is portrayed with remarkable sympathy and understanding. (As mentioned before, a figure of a Jewish soldier in the Soviet context relates to the Holocaust by representing the fate of Jews during the war.) Farber appears first as a remote Jewish intellectual, small and insecure, especially next to his masculine Russian comrades. Yet in the film it is this Jewish nerd who stands up to an evil Stalinist and even proves himself on the battlefield by becoming a brilliant commander.

This portrayal unnerved the Soviet military brass, and Jewish heroes thereafter disappeared from the screens. The next Jewish soldier to appear on the Soviet screen was only in 1967, in *Chronicle of the Dive Bomber* (*Khronika pikiruiushchego bombardirovshchika*, 1967; dir. Naum Birman), featuring the

winning character of Venia Gurevich, a violinist and a bomber-jet fighter. Like in the earlier *Soldiers*, there are no direct Holocaust references in this film; however, Venia is portrayed as longing for his overtly Jewish grandfather, prompting the audience to ponder about the old man's fate.[21]

The Thaw period was a time of renewed interest in films about World War II. Often these were more personal and reflective than previously. Predictably, most of these new war movies did not touch upon the Holocaust at all, as if it had never happened. This was the norm. However, in a radical departure from this norm, several filmmakers attempted to make the Holocaust the main focus of their work. But most of these attempts were banned from production and remained what I call the "phantom cinema" of the Holocaust. Yet several screenplays did slip through the censorship cracks, and a number of films with Holocaust plots or subplots were made and even released. In most of these films, the representation of the Holocaust was, to various degrees, in line with the previously formed policies of universalization and externalization.

The first among these was a Soviet classic, *The Fate of a Man* (*Sud'ba cheloveka*, 1959; dir. Sergei Bondarchuk), an epic story of a Russian man, Sokolov, and his trials and tribulations during and after the war. He is captured by the Germans on the front and ends up in a concentration camp, where he witnessed the selection and extermination of Jews. Despite the film's most oblique reference to the events of the Holocaust on Soviet territory, the portrayal of the events outside of the Soviet borders is more direct. In a heart-wrenching scene, Jews are forced off the trains and children are pried away from their parents, all to the cheerful tune of contrapuntal music. The victims are then herded toward a crematorium located behind a barbed-wire fence, disguised by a sign, "The Bath." The next shot places the crematorium with its enormous chimney in the center of the frame, with several lines of people slowly moving toward it. Then the camera closes up on

the chimney. Finally, only black smoke fills the screen. This is all that remained of the people who were gassed.

Nearly identical images, including barbed-wire fences, gas chambers, and crematoria chimneys, appeared in a later film, *Sons of the Fatherland* (*Syny Otechestva,* 1968; dir. Latif Faiziev), which otherwise is a far-fetched story of a heroic Uzbek Communist in a concentration camp who switched identities with a Jewish prisoner in order to save him from certain death. The selection and gassing of Jews, as seen through the eyes of the main characters, is a powerful and authentic scene. This historically inaccurate and aesthetically uneven film still deserves credit for at least a partial picture of the Holocaust. Importantly, in this and other films, the Holocaust is represented through the images of the camps. This is not only because of their iconic nature, but also because they fit perfectly with the Soviet policy of externalization.

Other films introduce the subject of the Holocaust through documentary footage. The first of them, *Goodbye, Boys!* (*Do svidan'ia, mal'chiki*, 1964), tells a story of three teenage friends — one of them Jewish — coming of age in a Russian seaside town on the brink of World War II. In the course of the film, it becomes clear that these inexperienced idealists will be sent off to the front lines, where they will encounter horror and tragedy. To tell this story, the filmmaker, Mikhail Kalik, used excerpts from archival footage to function as flash-forwards to the war and the Holocaust. One of these flash-forwards depicts familiar Holocaust imagery: freight cars loaded with people and ghetto Jews with Stars of David on their jackets lugging suitcases. Another captures the end of the war: ruins of German cities, white flags of surrender, then concentration-camp inmates behind barbed wire, mass graves, and the liberation of the camp.[22] As depicted on screen,

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22 These excerpts are taken from Soviet footage, reproduced in several Soviet documentaries: *Auschwitz* (Oświęcim, 1946), *Film Documents of Atrocities Committed by the German-Fascist Invaders* (*Kinodukumenty o zverstvakh nemetsko-fashistskikh zakhvatchikov*, 1946), and *The Judgment of the Peoples* (1946).

the events of the Holocaust took place outside the borders of the USSR. Kalik, a Jewish filmmaker who was aware of the history of the Holocaust, tried to represent the events on Soviet soil as well, but was not given access to the archival footage depicting the destruction of Jews in the Soviet Nazi-occupied territories.[23] Kalik did not universalize the Holocaust, but by denying him access to the necessary footage, externalization was forced upon him.

An influential Soviet film, *Ordinary Fascism* (*Obyknovennyi fashizm,* 1965; dir. Mikhail Romm), also relies on archival documents to invoke the Holocaust. This documentary, best defined as an "essay-film," is the first of its kind to investigate the nature of the totalitarian regimes—ostensibly in Nazi Germany.[24] The film draws on diverse visual materials, including official Nazi newsreels, footage from the personal archives of Goebbels and Hitler, children's drawings, photographs from the Auschwitz museum, amateur shots taken by Nazi troops, and contemporary *vérité* sequences. This visual evidence constitutes an indictment of Nazi Fascism, including its murderous antisemitic policies.

While censorship prevented the filmmakers from speaking about the Holocaust directly, they still found subtle ways to bring it in. The film subverts the prevailing norms of externalization and universalization by careful editing of images and voiceover. For instance, crimes against the Jews in the Soviet territories are not mentioned in the voiceover, but are depicted in the archival photographs on screen. Another example is that the universalizing voiceover narrative is offset by overtly Jewish images, signifying the identity of the victims. As a result the message is coded—but clear.

One Thaw-era film that is an extraordinary exception to the dictate of universalization and externalization is *Eastern Corridor* (*Vostochnyi koridor*, 1966; dir. Valentin Vinogradov).

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23   Gershenson, *The Phantom Holocaust*, pp. 92–98.
24   For a definition of "essay-film," see Phillip Lopate, "In Search of the Centaur: The Essay-Film," in *Totally, Tenderly, Tragically: Essays and Criticism from a Lifelong Love Affair with the Movies* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), pp. 280–311.

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This film captures the all-encompassing horror of the war in Nazi-occupied Belarus. Set in the ghetto, in the Nazi jail, and among the underground fighters, it presents a complicated, disjointed narrative of heroism and betrayal. Most unique is the film's direct engagement with the tragic fate of Jews in occupied Soviet territory, culminating with the execution of the ghetto population. This is not only one of the most powerful scenes in this film, but, arguably, in all Holocaust cinema around the world. Based on real-life events, the scene is set in a ghetto near Minsk, in occupied Belarus, and both the images and the soundtrack are overtly Jewish.

Drawing on the tradition of the Soviet poetic cinema of the 1960s, the filmmaker creates a striking picture of an execution, using symbolism of water, light, and darkness. The camera pans over roaring water to reveal slowly that the river is full of people struggling against the current in the dark. In the glow of the burning torches, the figures in *tallitot* (Jewish prayer shawls) are praying and bowing in unison while standing knee-high in water. The soundtrack is multi-layered: over the sound of gunshots, we hear the rush of the water, children screaming, and a cantor's voice chanting the prayer "The Rock of Israel" (*Tsur Yisroel*), a plea for deliverance and redemption. At the end of the scene, a naked young woman steps out of the crowd of praying Jews, faces the camera, and implores God in Yiddish.

Like *The Unvanquished* before it, *Eastern Corridor* stands out for its moving depiction of the events of the Holocaust on Soviet soil. And like the earlier film, *Eastern Corridor* also sacrificed historical accuracy for the greater emotional power of the scenes. Both films draw on potent cinematic references in order to create an authentic language for representing the Jewish catastrophe. Not surprisingly, the Soviet authorities curtailed the film and prevented its wide release. Unseen at home, and unknown abroad, to this day this film remains a phantom.[25]

Other attempts to represent the Holocaust on Soviet screens

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25   Gershenson, *The Phantom Holocaust*, pp. 127–144.

with such candor and force were quashed completely. Such was the fate of *Gott mit Uns* (1961), a screenplay by Vytautas Žalakevičiaus and Grigorii Kanovich. Its protagonist, a Lithuanian Catholic priest, is conflicted over his loyalty to a young Jewish boy, whom he saved on a whim, and to his congregation, which was endangered by the boy's survival. This powerful screenplay could have been the most sophisticated, nuanced, and profound treatment of the Holocaust; instead, banned by the censors, it became a file in the archive.

The same fate awaited two film projects by the filmmaker Mikhail Kalik. The first screenplay, *Stalemate* (*Vechnyi shakh,* 1965), based on Icchokas Meras's novel of the same name was set in the Vilna ghetto, where each member of the Lipman family resisted the Nazis in their own way. Young Isaac Lipman is at the center of the plot: the results of his chess game with the sadistic commandant will determine the fate of the ghetto. The second screenplay, *King Matt and the Old Doctor* (*Korol' Mateush i staryi doktor,* 1966), was based on the life and work of Janusz Korczak, a Jewish Polish doctor, writer, and educator. Korczak refused to save his own life by abandoning the orphans in his care in the Warsaw ghetto. He was deported along with the children and killed in Treblinka. The screenplay weaves together the historical events of life in the ghetto and the fanciful world of Korczak's children's novel. The censors wanted Kalik to put less emphasis on the Holocaust, but Kalik refused. Ultimately, both screenplays were banned, and Kalik emigrated to Israel in 1971.[26]

Two phantoms actually attained reality in the *perestroika* era. *Commissar* (1966; dir. Aleksandr Askoldov), set during the Russian Civil War, is not a Holocaust film. Yet it features an important scene that depicts a vision of the Holocaust to come, portrayed with great emotional force. Banned for its expression of overt sympathy for persecuted Jews, *Commissar* languished on the censor's shelf for twenty years. It was finally released

26 Ibid., pp. 102–126.

only during *perestroika*, in 1987. Another screenplay, *Our Father* (*Otche nash*, by Boris Ermolaev, Mikhail Suslov, and Valentin Kataev), was penned in the 1960s, but was not made into a film for over twenty years. Its plot was as simple as it was tragic: a nameless Jewish woman wanders the streets of occupied Odessa with her little son, hoping to hold out until the deportation ends. She tries to find shelter from the cold and a safe haven for her boy, but to no avail. The censors forced numerous changes to be made to the screenplay, and then ultimately banned it.[27]

During the Thaw period the Holocaust still gained only a partial presence on screens. In Soviet films the events of the Holocaust almost never assumed a central position in the narrative, and when they did, the censorship interfered. But at least several films engaged with the subject, and some were even circulated. Once the relatively liberal era came to an end, at the time of the Arab-Israeli War of 1967 and the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, all Jewish subjects became completely off-limits.

V. The Brezhnev Era of Stagnation: The Gray Years, 1969–1988

If the time of late Stalinism is referred to as "the black years" of Soviet Jewry, then the period of Brezhnev's rule may be called "the gray years."[28] There were no mass executions of Jewish writers or total extermination of Jewish culture, but Jews were still not welcome on screens. The only reference to Judaism appeared in anti-Zionist documentaries, which verged on antisemitic. In this cultural milieu the Holocaust was not exactly a popular subject.

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27   Ibid., pp. 190–205.
28   I borrow the term "gray years" from Zvi Gitelman, who originally used it to characterize treatment of Jews during the Thaw and in the early years of Brezhnev's rule. See his *A Century of Ambivalence: The Jews of Russia and the Soviet Union, 1881 to the Present* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

During the long Brezhnev era, very few films touched upon the Jewish fate during the war. The only references to the Holocaust appeared in films that featured figures of Jewish fighters in the Red Army which are already familiar to us. A completely forgotten TV film, *No Way Back* (*Obratnoi dorogi net*, 1970; dir. Grigorii Lipshits), was the first to make a direct connection between the Holocaust and the participation of Jews in the war. The film features a Jewish character, Solomon, who joined the partisans because he is looking for his wife and their five children, who ran away from the Nazis. But when Solomon, together with another partisan, enters the *shtetl* (where his family found refuge), the place is unusually quiet. The camera shows pictures of the devastated village and then turns to Solomon's fallen face, as he gradually comes to the realization that his entire family has been killed. At the end of the film, Solomon falls in battle.

A Holocaust reference in a Soviet blockbuster *And the Dawns Are Quiet Here* (*A zori zdes' tikhie*, 1972; dir. Stanislav Rostotskii) is much more oblique. The characters in the film are young women — Red Army soldiers. Among them is Sonia, an intellectual, reserved Jewish girl. Through her character, the film, at least indirectly, touches upon the tragic Jewish fate during the war. As Sonia marches along with her sergeant, she admits to him that she has probably lost her parents, who stayed behind in occupied Minsk. Sonia herself, along with her Russian comrades, is assigned to a dangerous scouting mission and dies a tragic untimely death.

But the two most significant films that dealt with the subject of the Holocaust during that era were *The Ascent* (*Voskhozhdenie*, 1976; dir. Larisa Shepitko) and *Come and See* (*Idi i smotri*, 1985; dir. Elem Klimov). Both were beautifully acted and shot art films; both had excruciating and protracted censorship histories. Both films are set in Nazi-occupied Belarus. The plot of *The Ascent* centers on the partisan Sotnikov, who is captured by the Germans and thrown into jail along with other partisans and villagers. Among them is a young Jewish girl, Basia, who was

hiding in the woods with the assistance of the locals. Despite her frailty, she does not betray those who helped her, and is executed. In that scene, Basia, although she is Jewish, is executed along with others — non-Jewish civilians and partisans — making her, in accordance with the Soviet policy of universalization, just another one of the victims of fascism.[29]

Come and See only marginally touched upon the Jewish Holocaust. The film is the coming-of-age story of a teenage boy, Flyora, who goes through a range of harrowing experiences, depicted with graphic brutality. There are no significant Jewish characters, but the film references the Nazi antisemitic propaganda and, in one brief scene, the abuse of a Jewish man by local collaborators before he is burned alive along with everyone else in the village. This is the extent of the film's depiction of the Holocaust on Soviet soil: although a Jewish man appears on the screen, his fate is no different than that of the non-Jewish victims. Again, the Holocaust is universalized.

But harking back to the earlier Soviet films, *Come and See* also includes archival footage depicting concentration-camp horrors, including emaciated dead bodies and barely alive *muselmann.* These images appear in the film as Flyora's visions flashing before his eyes after he witnesses yet another brutal scene. Nothing in this camp footage indicates the Jewish identities of the victims, but in Flyora's other vision, also drawn from archival footage, there is a brief image of a storefront marked by the Nazis with the word "*Jude*" and a Star of David. Like in the earlier films, to the extent that the Nazi crimes against Jews are represented as such, the Holocaust is both universalized and externalized.

VI. *Perestroika* and Beyond: From 1989 Onward

In 1985, Gorbachev came to power, instituting the reforms of *perestroika,* which is Russian for "restructuring." The ideological grip was loosened, and Soviet society underwent

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29   Ibid., pp. 169–171.

liberalization. By 1988, the Soviet censorship had come to an end, and films on previously untouchable subjects flooded the screens. In a radical departure from the past, scores of Jewish films were made at that time. Among those were several films dealing with the Holocaust. Previously banned films, including the above-mentioned *Commissar*, were released. The phantoms became real.

But this was not necessarily a cause for celebration. The long-banned screenplay, *Our Father* (*Otche nash*, 1989; dir. Boris Ermolaev), which was finally made into a film, resulted in a strange allegorical tale stripped of historic detail and overloaded with Christian allusions and dark symbolism. Several other films did focus on the events of the Holocaust without universalizing or externalizing it, but treated the subject in a simplistic and formulaic way. *The Parrot Who Spoke Yiddish* (*Popugai kotoryi govoril na idish*, 1990; dir. Efraim Sevela) was an uneven comedy about the misadventures of a Jewish soldier whose family died in the Vilna ghetto. *Exile* (*Izgoi*, 1991; dir. Vladimir Savel'ev) was beautifully shot, but presented the tragic fate of a Jewish Polish family in occupied Ukraine in a melodramatic and even sensationalist way.

By far the best of these films was *Ladies' Tailor* (*Damskii portnoi*, 1990; dir. Leonid Gorovets). Set in Kiev on the eve of the mass execution in Babi Yar, it is a story of an old Jewish tailor who spends the last night with his family in their soon-to-be-lost home. The film ends with a procession of Jews being marched to Babi Yar — to certain death. But this film's treatment of the Holocaust is limited by heavy-handed symbolism and a dualistic black/white representation of the events, characteristic of *perestroika*-era films.[30]

During the time when these films were made, the Soviet economy collapsed, and the normal channels of distribution were cut off. As a result these films enjoyed a limited release at best. The Holocaust remained a phantom on the late Soviet

30   Ibid., pp. 206–216.

and even post-Soviet screens. The films were there, but no one saw them. The only film that persevered in this harsh economic climate was *Ladies' Tailor*—the TV reruns saved it. Even today it is by far the best-known Soviet Holocaust film. To the degree that there is a Russian *Schindler's List*, it is *Ladies' Tailor.*

At the end of 1991, the Soviet Union was dissolved. Along with the state, the entire Soviet film industry as such ceased to exist. By the late 1990s and into the 2000s, filmmaking gradually bounced back. Still, only a few narrative Holocaust films were made, none of them significant. Most of these movies are characterized by an unsophisticated treatment of the Holocaust, often compounded by low production values. Among these films are *I'm a Russian Soldier* (*Ia—russkii soldat*, 1995; dir. Andrei Maliukov), *From Hell to Hell* (*Iz ada v ad*, 1996; dir. Dmitrii Astrakhan), and two films both entitled *Babi Yar*, one directed by Nikolai Zaseev-Rudenko (2002) and another by Jeff Kanew (2003). Predictably, none of these films achieved critical or box-office success.[31]

However, in a radical departure from Soviet times, the Holocaust has become a subject of several important documentary films. The most significant ones include *Rebellion in Sobibor* (*Vosstanie v Sobibore*, 1990; dirs. Pavel Kogan and Lily van den Bergh), *David* (2002; dir. Aleksei Fedorchenko), and *Children from the Abyss* (*Deti iz bezdny*, 2002; dir. Pavel Chukhrai), which was part of the internationally produced mini-series *Broken Silence.*

All these films made in post-Soviet times stand in some way in marked contrast to the ones made (or attempted to be made) during the Soviet era. With censorship restrictions completely removed, these films speak openly about the Jewish identity of their characters and about the persecutions that Jews faced. Similarly, these films now can bring up instances of local antisemitism and collaboration. It is also more common now to encounter minor Jewish characters in war dramas; to a degree,

31   Ibid., pp. 218–222.

the discourse on the Holocaust has been normalized. At the same time, the Soviet legacy of silencing the Holocaust continues. This is why we are not likely to see many Holocaust films coming out of the "new Russia." In contemporary war or historical films, the Holocaust receives but passing reference.

This is also part of a larger problem: memory work is still not done in Russia. Despite the bombastic war memorials and official rhetoric about the glorious victory, the country lives in a state of amnesia. The crimes of Stalin's regime are still neither atoned nor memorialized. And as the actual participants and witnesses to the dramatic and tragic events of the twentieth century are almost all gone, the collective memory is being lost with them. In Russia there is no concept of a "second generation" — be they children of war veterans or of Holocaust survivors.

The inertia of the Soviet discourse, which universalized and externalized the Holocaust, is still a factor — no one wants to take historic responsibility for the crimes committed on Soviet soil. This is why the Jewish Holocaust remains an uncomfortable subject even in today's Russia. In the words of the contemporary critic and keen cultural observer Alik Loevsky, "Honest people are shamed by it, and the rest just don't want to be bothered."[32]

32   Personal communication, March 4, 2012.