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The Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center in Moscow: Judaism for the masses

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In 2012, a new Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center opened in Moscow – an event unthinkable during the Soviet regime. Financed at the level of \$50 million, created by an international crew of academics and museum designers, and located in a landmark building, the museum immediately rose to a position of cultural prominence in the Russian museum scene. Using interactive technology and multimedia, the museum's core exhibition presents several centuries of complex local Jewish history, including the Second World War period. Naturally, the Holocaust is an important part of the story. Olga Gershenson's essay analyzes the museum's relationship to Holocaust history and memory in the post-Soviet context. She describes the museum's struggle to reconcile a Soviet understanding of the "Great Patriotic War" with a dominant Western narrative of the Holocaust, while also bringing the Holocaust in the Soviet Union to a broader audience via the museum. Through recorded testimonies, period documents, and film, the museum's display narrates the events of the Holocaust on Soviet soil. This is a significant revision of the Soviet-era discourse, which universalized and externalized the Holocaust. But this important revision is limited by the museum's choice to avoid the subject of local collaborators and bystanders. The museum shies away from the most pernicious aspect of the Holocaust history on Soviet soil, missing an opportunity to take historic responsibility and confront the difficult past.

Keywords: Jewish museum; Russian Jews; Chabad-Lubavitch; Holocaust; World War II; cultural memory

In early Soviet times, synagogues (as well as churches) were turned into stables and barns. Recently, in a curious reversal, a garage in Moscow has been turned into a Jewish museum. This is a moment of triumph, but also of irony.

Recent scholarship suggests approaching historical museums as institutions that both reflect and reproduce their societies' ideologies. The elements of a museum – architecture, curatorial choices, and exhibit design – all convey the institution's political narrative. Major museums are usually (and particularly in this case) expensive undertakings, involving legislation, fundraising, and planning, and as such they are evidence of a society's commitment to its own national agenda. Therefore, we can read historical museums as cultural documents, which give us a glimpse not so much into the past, which they ostensibly are trying to preserve, as into the present moment in which they emerge, function, and are interpreted by critics and audiences.¹ Naturally,

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a Jewish museum in Russia has to grapple with local historical and cultural heritage and to stake a claim in the national past: Which stories are told in its displays? What is highlighted and what is omitted? How is the Jewish story integrated with the broader national narrative?

Most importantly, how does the story of the Holocaust fit into a Jewish museum's narrative in Russia? Because World War II looms large in Soviet and later Russian history and memory and is equally a key event for modern Jewish history, much of the relationship between Jews and non-Jews in the Soviet Union and its successor states hinges on what happened during the war.

Given all that, this paper will address two sets of interrelated questions. First, what does the mere fact of the museum say about the position of Jews in today's Russia? How does the museum present Jews in Russia and how does it integrate them into Russia's history? Second, given the importance of World War II and the Holocaust in both Jewish and Russian history, how does the museum represent these events?

From garage to museum

The building housing the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center was originally the Bakhmetevsky bus garage. Located at 11 Obratsov Street in Moscow, the building was designed in 1926 by the Soviet avant-garde architect Konstantin Melnikov. Like Melnikov's other designs, it became a landmark building.² The location of the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center, which opened its doors there in November 2012, is neither central nor easily accessible, especially for tourists, but it has advantages. The site of the museum is part of an entire campus of Jewish religious and cultural organizations that sprouted in the post-Soviet era in the traditionally Jewish neighborhood (to the extent that Moscow has Jewish neighborhoods) of Marina Roshcha. The museum building shares its territory with a Jewish day school, yeshiva, medical center, and several Jewish charity organizations. A nearby synagogue, Jewish publishing house, and kosher markets serve a small community of observant Jews, affiliated predominantly with Chabad-Lubavitch.³

The museum was initiated by the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia, the umbrella organization for Chabad-Lubavitch in Russia, supported by the Kremlin, and financed by a handful of Russian Jewish oligarchs at a cost of US\$50 million.⁴ The museum was a long time in the making: the dilapidated garage building was donated to the Hasidic Jewish Community Center by Moscow City Hall in 2001. The original idea was that the building would house an educational-cultural center, including an exhibition on Jewish culture and an art gallery.⁵ After years of faltering attempts to renovate the building, it was finally restored in 2007–8 with the involvement of the oligarch Roman Abramovich, who served on the board of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia. In September 2008, the building opened its doors to the public as the Garage Center of Contemporary Culture, managed by Daria Zhukova, at the time Abramovich's girlfriend.⁶ From the outset it was clear that the historic building would house the contemporary art center only temporarily, and that eventually the Federation would open a Jewish museum at the site.⁷ Sure enough, in 2011 the Garage Center for Contemporary Culture moved to another location, and the building passed to the Jewish Museum.

The Federation's plan for the future museum was formulated most clearly in an official conversation between the Russian Chief Rabbi, Berel Lazar of Chabad-Lubavitch, and Vladimir Putin. Rabbi Lazar, known for his close relationship with Putin,

emphasized the necessity to create a museum that would educate new generations of Russians in the spirit of tolerance, but also hold up Russia as a model of the co-existence of different religions in a multinational and multiconfessional society: "It is necessary to use this approach to tell the history of Jews in Russia and how they lived, as well as to show the role of the Red Army in the liberation of Jews from Nazism. I think all these things will educate our youth in the spirit of respect and tolerance. This is necessary for Russia. But it is also very important for visitors who will come here looking for the 'wounds of history.' ... I think that such a museum will truly show the difference between the historical past and today's reality."⁸ Putin was so moved by this idea that he donated one month of his salary towards the creation of the museum.⁹ Shortly after, the Federal Security Service (FSB; formerly KGB) pledged its support by providing documents from its archives.¹⁰ Close ties between the Chabad-Lubavitch leadership and Putin's regime, as well as Putin's widely publicized support, created the perception that the museum-in-the-making would be an officially sanctioned institution, even though it was created with private funds. Indeed, the final exhibits tell a story that is consistent with the regime's customary positive portrayal of Russia to the West. To that end, the museum positions Jews as a model minority.

By the early 2000s, an initial idea for the museum had already been formulated: "The plan was to create an institution designed on the principles of 'edutainment', where visitors can learn the history of Russian Jewry in a fun way."¹¹ For the creative concept the Federation turned first to Universal Studios, and then to the Hettema Group, a firm famous for designing theme parks and immersive environments.¹² The Hettema Group developed the overall preliminary concept, program, layout, and interpretive and master plan for the museum.¹³ Ralph Appelbaum Associates (RAA), an international design firm with experience working on major Holocaust and Jewish museums, won a later competition and was responsible for taking the exhibition to the next stage.¹⁴

By the time the Federation retained RAA, it had a defined vision: the Federation wanted a world-class museum using cutting-edge digital technology and interactivity to tell the story of Jews in Russia. The exhibition was to address the widest possible audiences in an accessible, fun, and educational way and to appeal not only to Russian Jews, a very small minority today, but also to non-Jewish Russians, tourists, and, most importantly, youth.¹⁵ RAA fully grasped the ambition of this vision.

Aside from a modest collection of Judaica and art, the new museum had no curators, collections, or research, only a budget, a building, and a deadline. To create the museum content from scratch, RAA put together a Content Committee consisting of five international scholars in the field of Russian Jewish history and in Jewish religion and culture.¹⁶ Many other scholars were brought in for consultation and for filmed interviews, which were later featured in the exhibits.

The Federation – or, in the words of RAA, the client – was adamant that the new museum was to open in November 2012.¹⁷ Although the seeds of the idea for the museum had been planted in 2001, the actual content of the museum was created in record time – less than four years from start to finish – in contrast, the core exhibition of POLIN Museum of the History of the Polish Jews was over ten years in the making. Starting in 2008, RAA designers conducted a series of workshops with the Content Committee and with representatives of the Federation – Rabbi Borukh Gorin, the Federation's spokesperson and a public intellectual, and Aleksandr Boroda, the President of the Federation, who was responsible for the business side of the project.¹⁸ Today Boroda is the Director General of the museum.

The client's vision of a museum as a popular educational attraction shaped the designers' approach. Following a collaborative development process with the client and the scholars, RAA settled on a multimedia narrative approach. The starting point would not be valuable objects or works of art, but concepts, historical narrative, and memories. Narrative exhibitions use not only original objects, but also reconstructed artifacts, film, sound, immersive installations, and interactive presentations of various kinds – in fact, object-based exhibitions also use such techniques, but not to the same extent. Multimedia narrative exhibitions are not only didactic, but also emotional and experiential; they often engage visitors on a visceral level to encourage a personal identification with the subject.¹⁹

Still, both the client and the RAA team felt that some original objects would be needed for the desired ambience and sense of authenticity. Doug Balder, the Project Manager for RAA, and Evelyn Reilly, the Interpretive Planner, traveled to the area of the former Pale of Settlement for inspiration and to purchase artifacts for the galleries representing traditional Jewish life and religious practices. Other objects were later bought in Moldova, Ukraine, and Israel. Most of the exhibits, however, were based on images, films, and interactive media.²⁰

To create this massive exhibition under such a tight deadline meant that the RAA team of designers and media specialists had to work intensively. A crew of filmmakers and media designers produced hours of film from a vast collection of archival photographs, visual art, documents, films, and sound. Incorporated into the exhibition are about 5000 photographs, 200 artifacts, 34 films, 32 digital interactives, six listening stations, eight custom maps, and a 4D theater with an animated film.²¹ The exhibition, located on a floor of enormous size, about 8500 square meters, presents over 2000 years of history, including a detailed multimedia timeline of 230 years of the history of Jews in Russia. The exhibition is in Russian and English, with occasional Hebrew and Yiddish.²² This museum is a remarkable, indeed unprecedented, undertaking – not only because it is the first Jewish museum on such a scale in Russia, but also because it is the first interactive and multimedia museum anywhere in the country.²³

Museum time: Soviet, Russian, and Jewish

The original historic building of the museum reflects the modernist avant-garde sensibility of the architect. The floor plan of the garage is a parallelogram, a design decision consistent with Melnikov's constructivist aesthetic and a way to help buses maneuver in and out of parking spaces. The RAA team decided to work with the original diagonal sensibility,²⁴ and organized the central space in the shape of an inverted V. The spaces along the side walls are similarly dynamic in shape (see [Figure 1](#)).

At the base of the inverted V, a ramp leads to the Beginnings Theater, a 4D experience dedicated to the history of the Jewish people as told in the Bible. A multimedia installation on Jewish migrations, starting with the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem until the partitioning of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth at the end of the eighteenth century, shows how Jews found themselves in the Russian Empire. A large exhibit presenting traditional life in a shtetl occupies the very center of the floor. Along the side walls of the space are exhibits dedicated to the history of Russian and Soviet Jews, with World War II and the Holocaust occupying the entire back wall, and the memorial space set in the tip of the inverted V. Finally, when one has exited the galleries, the Tolerance Center, a separate area furnished with benches, tablets, a podium, and a screen, concludes the museum.²⁵



Figure 1. Museum map.

The Federation made clear to the designers that the three most important parts of the museum were the Beginnings Theater, the gallery “The Great Patriotic War and the Holocaust,” and the Tolerance Center.²⁶ Indeed, these three areas frame the physical layout of the museum: the Beginnings Theater and the Tolerance Center define one end of the exhibit space (the first at the entrance, the latter at the exit), and the war and Holocaust gallery dominate the back wall.

The stories told in these three important areas express the tensions between Jewish and Soviet/Russian narratives. The Beginnings Theater is fully dedicated to presenting the history of the Jewish people as told in the Bible. “The Great Patriotic War and the Holocaust,” as its title clearly states, combines the Soviet story of the war and the Jewish story of the catastrophe. The Tolerance Center promotes a universal idea of multiculturalism in the “New Russia.” Such tensions between Jewish and dominant cultures have characterized Jewish museums since their very inception in the late nineteenth century. This is because early Jewish museums appeared as a response to, and expression of, assimilation.²⁷ In many cases, it was assimilated secular Jews who founded these museums to present the culture and tradition from which they were already distanced. Even today, Jewish museums are, more often than not, secular institutions. In that sense, the Moscow museum is unusual, as it is sponsored by Chabad-Lubavitch, a branch of Hasidism dedicated to promoting Judaism and strengthening Jewish observance. Each Jewish museum has to grapple with the tensions between the universal and the particular endemic to such institutions.²⁸ The question is how the Moscow Jewish museum resolves these tensions.

The Beginnings Theater, the first place that people visit on their tour of the museum, is the most Jewish and the least historical of the exhibits. Using immersive animations and an ambient soundtrack, a 20-minute film gives the narrative from the biblical creation of the world to the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, explaining the origins of the

Jewish people and the major tenets of Judaism.²⁹ This 4D multimedia experience, a technologically ambitious gallery, is particularly appealing to young audiences. As the animated images fill the circular screen that surrounds the viewers, the seats of the theater rock to convey destruction, droplets of water are sprinkled on the audience to signify the Flood, and in the story of the Exodus laser projections of locusts fill the air.

The main exhibition space is where the tension between Jewish and Soviet/Russian narratives starts to emerge. It can first be felt in the spatial organization of the exhibit, which presents two conflicting approaches to time. In the words of the museum's own narrative, "in the first case, it is linear historical time, in another case, it is time of tradition – the circle of life and Jewish holidays."³⁰ Jewish time is a sacred time, and as such is cyclical and eternal.³¹ Significantly, the emotional heart of the museum is an exhibit called "Shtetl: A Jewish Home," framed on one side by "Storyline" – a chronological narrative of Russian Jewish history told through texts, images, maps, timelines, and short videos – and on another by an exhibit called "Judaism – a Living Religion," an overview of the Jewish lifecycle and holidays, with nods to local observances in the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. "Shtetl" is thus located between the axes of history and religion, functioning as both a historical exhibit about the Jewish town in the Russian Empire and a chance to experience, through recreated environments or interactive technology, such paradigmatic Jewish settings as the synagogue, heder, and Sabbath table.

Touch-sequence videos bring the various elements of the interactive exhibits to life. In the Sabbath tableau, a mother blesses the candles, and a father says the kiddush, reflecting the gender division in traditional Judaism that Chabad promotes. Both parents are portrayed by attractive actors, surrounded by equally attractive children, creating an idealized nostalgic picture of a traditional Jewish family. The synagogue is one of several recreated environments in the museum (inspired by an actual synagogue in Bershad, Ukraine). Unlike in a traditional museum, where displays are not to be touched, visitors here can inhabit the space of the synagogue, sit in a pew while immersed in a soundscape of prayer and song, and even imagine themselves Jewish scholars as they scroll through the pages of a digital Torah, pulling up the weekly Torah readings with a brief commentary. This Torah "scroll" is a key interactive element of the exhibit. Although inspired by real synagogues and schools that the designers visited in the course of their research, the resulting environments and tableaus present ever-lasting Jewish values of tradition, learning, family, and continuity. The central location of this particular exhibit speaks to its importance, as is emphasized in the museum's own narrative.³² In fact, this exhibit takes up the bulk of the official tour and, according to the staff, is the museum's most popular attraction.³³

In contrast to this eternal Jewish time, the events of Russian/Soviet Jewish history from the nineteenth century to the twenty-first are arranged according to a secular historical timeline. The first gallery, "Cities and Beyond," an exhibit designed like a café, with interactive displays at each table, covers events of the late imperial period, including urbanization, migration, and the entrance of Jews into politics. The next gallery, "War and Revolution," covers World War I, the Bolshevik Revolution, and the pogroms that followed the post-revolutionary Civil War. The gallery, "Soviet Union: 1922–1941" covers the rise of Soviet Yiddish culture and its figureheads in the general context of the 1920s and 1930s. It is at this pivotal point in the exhibition that the major gallery, "The Great Patriotic War and the Holocaust," appears. The two remaining galleries focus on the postwar and current periods. "Postwar Era" covers the antisemitic campaigns of late Stalinism, as well as Khrushchev's

liberalization, represented through a recreated Soviet apartment, home to an ordinary Jewish family. The Brezhnev period, characterized by a nascent dissident and emigration movement, is portrayed through a recreated birch forest such as where Soviet Jewish activists gathered for underground celebrations of Jewish holidays and culture. Finally, the gallery “Perestroika to the Present,” which has been recently remodeled, features a lavishly produced film projected in a separate theater. The film portrays Russian Jewish experiences during Perestroika, Yeltsin’s era, and the current regime, culminating with a speech by Putin. The narration emphasizes the revival and flourishing of Jewish culture and religion in contemporary Russia, including synagogues, organizations, schools, universities, and research centers. The tone throughout is celebratory.

While this is the part of the museum where the national narrative of the “New Russia” becomes palpable, it has already emerged in the previous historical galleries. These galleries cover events in the life of Russian and Soviet Jewry, some of them tragic, like the story of antisemitic persecutions, and others joyous, like the stories of Jewish accomplishments. All of those events are inscribed on the larger canvas of general Russian history, progressing forward in contrast with circular and eternal Jewish time. The takeaway is that in the past Jews endured antagonism and discrimination, but they nevertheless succeeded in the face of these trials and tribulations. Thus the museum delivers on Rabbi Lazar’s promise to Putin to “truly show the difference between the historical past and today’s reality.”³⁴

Moreover, the Soviet part of the exhibit clearly demonstrates not just that Jews contributed to Russian/Soviet culture, but that they shaped the very core of it, through music, literature, cinema, and other arts. To that end the museum includes in its narrative a variety of important cultural figures.³⁵ By creating this narrative the museum asserts that Jews are part and parcel of the Russian nation, and their triumphal story makes them a model Russian minority, a facet of the new multinational, multi-religious Russia that is tolerant of others (although high fences around the museum and a security checkpoint at the entrance suggest otherwise). As a model minority, Jews are the beacon of tolerance, promoting it in Russian society and speaking for other, not-yet-model minorities.³⁶

But it is the Tolerance Center, the least Jewish part of the museum, where the narrative of the “New Russia” comes to the fore. This is also evident in its spatial organization, as the Tolerance Center is located outside of the core exhibit in an open space adjacent to a café and a museum shop. This open space, with minimalist white seating, is clearly inspired by the Museum of Tolerance (MOT) in Los Angeles.³⁷ Like at MOT, visitors here can watch educational videos on individual stations and take quizzes to assess their own tolerance of minorities based on disability, race, and religion (but not sexual orientation). The Tolerance Center can be read as an attempt by the Russian state to respond to Russia’s growing xenophobia, which is aimed today at new ethnic and religious minorities, including people from Central Asia and the Caucasus. Members of this group, who are often illegal guest workers, face endless hostility and discrimination at the personal, social, and state levels, including race-motivated riots in today’s Russia.³⁸ Following in the footsteps of MOT, the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center in Moscow attempts to link a paradigmatic minority, Jews, and the new Others.

However, the Tolerance Center is a distinct and separate part of the museum. It is not directly connected with the thematic exhibits, and is not integrated into the museum’s narrative, although antisemitism and the Holocaust, which are part of the

museum's narrative, are icons of intolerance. The content of the Tolerance Center was initiated and produced entirely by the Federation without the involvement of RAA designers.³⁹ The Content Committee had strong reservations about it and felt that it was imposed on the museum.⁴⁰ In the words of Benjamin Nathans, "The Russian-Jewish narrative did not lend itself in any straightforward way to a message of tolerance."⁴¹

The Tolerance Center is not the only semi-autonomous entity within the museum. The historic building also houses a Children's Center, with programs and classes for young visitors, and the Schneersohn Collection, a library of precious Jewish books and manuscripts assembled by the early rabbinic leaders of Chabad.⁴² The museum also houses the Avant-garde Center, with a library and public programs dealing with contemporary art (not necessarily Jewish). What makes the Tolerance Center stand out is that unlike the Avant-garde Center and the Schneersohn Library, it is positioned as a crucial part of the museum, so much so that it features in the museum's title. Its importance is further emphasized by the museum's plans to open 11 more tolerance centers across Russia, an initiative for which it will seek both private and public funding.⁴³

Ironically, as Russia is embracing the discourse of tolerance, in the West this discourse has been challenged as inherently problematic on account of its power to enforce ethnic, racial, and sexual regulations and to serve as a tool of imperial governmentality.⁴⁴ This is particularly evident in the Russian case, as the Tolerance Center clearly prescribes the boundaries of tolerable and intolerable, with sexual minorities excluded from the necessity to be "tolerated."

The Great Patriotic War with a side of the Holocaust

If the Beginnings Theater exemplifies the Jewish vantage point and the Tolerance Center the political stance of the Russian state, the gallery "The Great Patriotic War and the Holocaust" represents most vividly the ambivalence between the Soviet and Jewish stories. This is manifestly the largest and most complex of the galleries, serving as the pivotal point of the museum and its center of gravity.

Holocaust memorialization in the West, including museums and memorials in the United States, Germany, and Israel, is a well-explored subject.⁴⁵ But in the Eastern bloc the subject of the Holocaust, and Jewish history in general, was largely off-limits. Since the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin Wall, this has been changing, with new museums, memorials, and education centers appearing all across Eastern Europe. But the question of Holocaust memory, particularly in Russia, is a new one, and how to integrate it with the memory of the war is not yet clear.⁴⁶ Scholars of memory theorize three distinct aspects of collective memory: communicative, cultural, and political.⁴⁷ Communicative memory has a limited time scope – one or two generations – and is based predominantly on everyday communication. Cultural memory, on the other hand, extends over a longer period, and can be expressed through formal commemorations and practices of observance (texts, ceremonies, and monuments). Cultural memory is carried out by its various bearers, such as historians, educators, and the media. Finally, symbolic aspects of cultural memory expressed top-down by official institutions and constituting state historical policy are identified as political memory.⁴⁸ Collective memory in the Soviet Union – and later in Russia – has excluded the memory of the Holocaust on all three levels.

In the postwar years, the events of the Holocaust were prohibited from discussion in the Soviet Union. This prohibition stymied the transmission of personal memory and the formation of communicative memory of the Holocaust.

As for cultural memory, the Holocaust was universalized or externalized.⁴⁹ In the process of universalization, the Holocaust was subsumed as part of the overall Soviet tragedy, with Jewish victims euphemistically labeled “peaceful Soviet citizens.”⁵⁰ When crimes against Jews were discussed as such, only the events of the Holocaust outside the borders of the Soviet Union were mentioned, a phenomenon I call “externalization.”⁵¹ To silence discussion of the Holocaust, these two mechanisms were used in tandem: universalization allowed the Soviets to cast Slavs and communists as the main target of Hitler’s attack and erase Jewish victimhood; externalization was used to avoid any implication of local bystanders or Nazi collaborators, and absolved the Soviet Union of any historic responsibility for mass Jewish losses on its soil. Throughout the Soviet era, any attempts to memorialize the Holocaust through monuments, literary texts, art, or media were completely or partially censored. In post-Soviet times and today, in Putin’s Russia, the memory of World War II is still firmly couched in old Soviet terms with a particular emphasis on the victory and heroism of the Russian people.⁵² Moreover, today this approach to the past is becoming increasingly nationalistic, playing up the regime’s claim of Russia’s special historic role and unique path.⁵³ In this version of the memory of the war, there is no space for a particularly Jewish catastrophe.

Finally, regarding political memory, the state has failed to acknowledge and memorialize the Holocaust. It is noteworthy that Russia is not a member of the International Task Force on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research, even though the events of the Holocaust took place on its territory.⁵⁴ The Holocaust is not part of state-authorized school curricula, and there is no formalized training of teachers on the subject.⁵⁵ With a few exceptions, there has been no official commemoration of the Holocaust through major museums, commemorations, or other practices.⁵⁶

At the same time, the Jewish (and Western) narrative of the Holocaust largely excludes the tremendous Soviet losses – about 27 million lives, including 12 million civilians. Moreover, the events of the Holocaust on Soviet territory are rendered all but invisible. As Natan Meir, a Content Committee member, summarizes, “in many Holocaust museums in Israel, Europe, and the United States, the Holocaust on Soviet soil – sometimes called ‘Holocaust by bullets’ – tends to be overshadowed by what might be called ‘the Holocaust in Poland,’ characterized by large ghettos such as Warsaw and Łódź and killing centers like Treblinka and Auschwitz.”⁵⁷

The designers and the Content Committee had to reconcile these two approaches and make adjustments – or, in the words of Natan Meir, “correctives” – to both.⁵⁸ The result is a hybrid representation, a combination of competing Soviet and Western discourses, although the museum does a better job of correcting the dominant Western discourse than it does correcting the Soviet one. This is evident in the title of the gallery. In most of the world, this war is known as “World War II,” which took place from 1939 to 1945. But in Russia the war – known by its Soviet name, the “Great Patriotic War” (*velikaia otechestvennaia voina* or, in literal translation, the “Great Fatherland War”) – started in 1941, with the German invasion of the Soviet Union, and ended in 1945. The gallery title keeps the Soviet name and dates of the war, but appends to it the term “Holocaust,” a word that was introduced into Russian circulation only in the mid-1990s and that is still not well known there.

In a departure from a Soviet discourse that universalized the Jewish story, the museum highlights the particular significance of the war for Jews, representing both

heroism and victimhood. Heroism is portrayed in a display about the Soviet Jewish war effort, a subject that has never been touched in Soviet mainstream media or memorials. The exhibit representing the Soviet Jewish effort at the front is introduced by two enormous objects: a real T-34 tank, a legendary Red Army weapon, and a life-size model of a Po-2 airplane, famous for being flown by “night witches” – female military aviators, some of whom were Jewish. To the right of them is a large screen showing video testimonies of former fighters. These large-scale videos and artifacts are complemented by intimate documents such as letters, photographs, and personal papers of Soviet Jews who fought at the fronts (see Figure 2).

While the subject of Jewish heroism features prominently in the gallery, evident especially in the stories of Jewish Red Army fighters and partisans, the framing of the subject retains Soviet discursive memorial strategies. The introductory text of the display reads, “like the entirety of the Soviet people, Jews participated in the defense of their motherland.” Here, Jews are simply added to the heroic Soviet story. Although the message is that of Jewish heroism, it can exist only in the context of the universalized story of the war, common to Jews and non-Jews alike. This is why the artifacts chosen for this gallery are such universal Soviet military symbols – the tank and the airplane.

Along with the fighters, the museum celebrates other Jewish contributions to what the Soviets called “the Great Victory,” featuring Soviet Jews who worked in industry, wrote poetry, served as journalists and photo-journalists, or composed songs universally known and loved by Russians. Once again, the Jews are added to the great universalized narrative of the war, harking back to the idea of “the internationalist solidarity” of all Soviet people, coming together to defeat the enemy.



Figure 2. Part of “The Great Patriotic War and the Holocaust” gallery. Photograph courtesy of the museum.

Jewish victimhood comes through most clearly in the main feature of the gallery: a panoramic film projected on a massive curved screen. The film interweaves wartime archival footage, testimonies of Holocaust survivors, and Red Army fighters to tell the story of Jewish suffering in the context of the German invasion of the USSR and the overall Soviet losses and valor. The film is supplemented by more traditional museum displays, including photos, maps, explanatory text, Nazi propaganda posters, and audio-stations featuring period music and poetry.

Importantly, the museum's display locates the events of the Holocaust on Soviet soil. This is a successful corrective to both Soviet-era discourse, which externalized the Holocaust, and Western discourse, which paid little attention to the Holocaust in the Soviet Union. The gallery features video testimonies of Soviet Holocaust survivors. Such testimonies became familiar in the West thanks to the work of such organizations as the Shoah Foundation, but they are entirely new in Moscow. Throughout the Soviet era, the identity of "Holocaust survivor" did not exist. In fact, survivors, like Soviet POWs, were forced to conceal the history of their imprisonment in ghettos or camps to avoid being suspected of treason.⁵⁹ The museum gives center stage to these testimonies, which not only expose visitors to a first-person perspective on the Holocaust, but also establish the category of "Holocaust survivor." In this way, the museum succeeds in both heroizing the Soviet Jews – fighters and intelligentsia – and eliciting empathy for the victims among them.

The museum avoids dealing with more difficult subjects, such as relations between Jews and non-Jews during the war. In the entire exhibit, there is only one brief paragraph about local collaborators "in some Lithuanian and Ukrainian towns." In that story, Russians are not implicated in the anti-Jewish violence. It is true, that most Jewish victims in the occupied Soviet territory were killed in Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, and Lithuania. But even within the contemporary borders of Russia there were dozens of ghettos and numerous sites of mass executions.⁶⁰ Instead, the Holocaust is presented as part of the heroic narrative of the war, according to which the good Soviets defeated the evil Germans. Consequently, the museum succeeds in glorifying and mourning, but without raising more controversial and relevant questions that would require coming to terms with a nation's difficult past.

This is not unique to post-Soviet Russia. All across the Eastern bloc, past historical – ideological models persist in approaches to the Holocaust, and some skeletons remain in the national closets. As John-Paul Himka and Joanna Michlic point out, the temptation is "to tell the past in a comforting way." The process of coming to terms with a past is uneven at best, and there are tensions between the models of "monumental history" and "critical history."⁶¹

Issues of memory and dealing with the past also emerge in the memorial part of the exhibit, the Remembrance Space. Located opposite the World War II and Holocaust panoramic film is a partially enclosed space, a cube, with an entrance from the side that faces the panoramic film, and candles lining the interior wall. Projected above the flames of the candles are the names of victims. Although reminiscent of a conventional Holocaust memorial, with its dark space, candles, and inscribed names, this treatment differs from other Holocaust memorials because the identity of the victims, other than their names, is missing. There are no indications in the space itself, and tour guides at the museum are vague about their identity. When I pressed the tour guide, I was given a number of five million victims, but was not sure who they were supposed to be – Jews? Civilians? POWs? – or how they were selected.

It turns out, this ambiguity is by design. The Federation was clear to the RAA team that they did not want a Holocaust memorial. Instead, they envisioned the Remembrance

Space as an ecumenical space with universal appeal.⁶² According to Doug Balder, this was one of the most challenging parts of designing the museum. In fact, RAA brainstormed dozens of designs before coming up with the versions they presented to the client. Ultimately, the client settled on the current design, which memorializes the overall Soviet losses in the war. In fact, according to the original concept, the inscribed names should represent all 27 million Soviet lives lost. However, technical limitations made projections of 27 million names impossible, forcing the media designers to cull together a selection of names from the three databases accessible from the computer monitors installed in the space.⁶³ The first one is a database of all known Jewish victims of the Holocaust in the world created by Israel's Yad Vashem. The second database is from the Memorial, a Russian historical and civil rights group known for memorializing victims of the Soviet totalitarian past; in this case the database memorializes those who fell in battle (Jews or not). The third database, from the Russian Defense Ministry, memorializes "heroic feats of the people in the Great Patriotic war."

Each of these three databases is a repository of different memories, from distinct historical and cultural discourses: Soviet and Jewish, heroes, and victims. What is the meaning of the museum's choice? Here, memorializing overall losses arguably continues the Soviet legacy of universalizing Jewish victims, while also providing a separate database for each group. This is a common discourse in Russia even today – "everyone suffered, not just the Jews." What is remarkable is that such a discourse appears in the context of a Jewish museum, one sponsored by Chabad. In fact, Boroda himself reiterated it in his interview on Russian television. Pointing out the disparity between the number of Jewish Holocaust victims and overall Soviet losses, "it would be wrong [for the museum] to focus only on the Holocaust."⁶⁴

The Holocaust in Russia is still interpreted as an internal Jewish affair, with limited relevance to anyone else. By contrast, in the Western world, although widely debated, the Holocaust is considered a central historic event of the twentieth century, the event that led to the coining of the word "genocide," with repercussions for citizens of the global world. Eastern Europe, to various degrees, is undergoing a process of acknowledgment and memorialization of the Holocaust. In Russia, not only antisemites, but even some progressive thinkers, believe the Holocaust should not be memorialized as a distinct and separate event.⁶⁵ According to this logic, Jewish victims are just a part of the larger losses of the Great Patriotic War, and it is sufficient to focus on the generalized story of the entire event. Given the dearth of the commemoration of the Jewish victims of the war in Russia, the Jewish museum could have taken an additional step in bringing the specificity of the Holocaust forward.

Perhaps the reason it did not do so is that the goals of the museum included promoting the image of Russia as a tolerant multicultural, multi-confessional society, and, in so doing, positioned Jews as a model minority. By weaving these newly imagined Jews into Soviet and Russian history and casting them in a positive role, the museum universalizes the Jewish experience.

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Olga Gershenson is Professor of Judaic and Near Eastern Studies at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, where she is also on the Film Studies faculty. A multi-disciplinary scholar, her interests lie at the intersection of culture, history, and film. Her first book, *Gesher: Russian Theater in Israel* (2005), pioneered the study of Russian immigrant cultural production. A series of articles on Russian-Israeli cinema cemented her status as the premier expert in the field. Gershenson's latest book, *The Phantom Holocaust: Soviet Cinema and Jewish Catastrophe* (2013), is the first scholarly treatment of the forgotten or unknown Soviet films missing from the international Holocaust filmography. Along with film, Professor Gershenson does research on spaces. Her collection *Ladies and Gents: Public Toilets and Gender* (2009) established the discipline of Toilet Studies. In her most recent work, she looks at Jewish museums in post-communist Europe, examining the relationship between space, politics, history, and culture. In addition to her research and teaching, Professor Gershenson curates film series, consults for festivals, and has a lively lecture schedule at universities, conferences, and museums around the world.

Notes

1. Annie E. Coombes, "Museums and the Formations of National and Cultural Identities," in *Museum Studies: An Anthology of Contexts*, ed. Bettina M. Carbonell (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2012), 260–73; Stephanie Shosh Rotem, *Constructing Memory: Architectural Narratives of Holocaust Museums* (New York: Peter Lang, 2013); Jennifer Hansen-Glucklich, *Holocaust Memory Reframed: Museums and the Challenges of Representation* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014).
2. E. Nikulina and K. Savkin, "Arkhitekturnyi Mirazh Bakhmet'evskogo Garazha," *Arkhitekturnyi Vestnik* 5, no. 80 (2004), 35–43.
3. Chabad, a branch of Hasidic Judaism aiming to promote Judaism and strengthen Jewish life, has made powerful inroads into post-Soviet Russia, and constitutes today the most forceful and politically connected Jewish organization there. For further background on Chabad-Lubavitch in Russia, see Caryn Aviv and David Shneer, *New Jews: The End of the Jewish Diaspora* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 36–41.
4. For an overview of the museum's financial history and present situation, see Maria Ganiantz, "Endaument v Rossii: Kak Evrejskii Muzei Tolerantnosti Sobral u Milliarderoev \$4,5 mln za Vecher," *Forbes*, 17 February 2014.
5. Aleksandr Vorontsov, "Bakhmet'evskii Avtobusnyi Garazh," *Heritage at Risk* (2006), 151–3.
6. Nikulina and Savkin, "Arkhitekturnyi Mirazh," 39. Horatio Silva, "Red Hottie," *New York Times*, 25 February 2010. The couple has since gotten married.
7. Vasilii Lepskikh, "4500 Kvadratnykh Metrov Tolerantnosti," *Kommersant*, 16 September 2008.
8. "Nachalo Vstrechi s Glavnym Ravvinom Rossii Berlom Lazarom," *President of Russia*, 5 June 2007, http://archive.kremlin.ru/appears/2007/06/05/1918_type63376_132942.shtml (accessed 12 May 2015).
9. Ibid.
10. Lepskikh, "4500 Kvadratnykh Metrov."
11. "Istoria Muzeia," *Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center*, <<http://www.jewish-museum.ru/about-the-museum/museum-history/>> (accessed 12 May 2015).
12. Aleksandr Boroda, interview with Ekaterina Shergova, *Nashe Vremia*, Sovershenno Sekretno TV Channel, 20 January 2013.
13. "Russian Jewish Museum," *Hettema Group*, <<http://www.thehettemagroup.com/projects/russian-jewish-museum>> (accessed 13 May 2015); "Istoria Muzeia," *Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center*, <http://www.jewish-museum.ru/about-the-museum/museum-history/> (accessed 13 May 2015).
14. Lepskikh, "4500 Kvadratnykh Metrov;" Doug Balder, interview with author, 12 December 2014. Initially, the German architectural firm Graft Labs was supposed to renovate and expand the space, but its plans were later dismissed, and RAA took over the project. For the Graft Labs design, see "World's Largest Jewish Museum to Be Built in Moscow," *archiCentral*, 9 June 2009.

15. Evelyn Reilly, interview with author, 12 December 2014; Natan M. Meir, "The Place of Polish Jewry in a Russian Jewish Museum: The Case of the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center in Moscow," *Studia Judaica* 2, no. 32 (2013): 102.
16. For the perspective of the scholars constituting the Content Committee, see essays by Benjamin Nathans, Natan M. Meir, Risa Levitt Kohn, Oleg Budnitskii, and Jonathan Dekel-Chen in this issue of *East European Jewish Affairs*.
17. Doug Balder, interview with author, 12 December 2014.
18. Benjamin Nathans, interview with author, 6 March 2015.
19. For a discussion of narrative museum, see Elaine Heumann Gurain, *Civilizing the Museum* (London: Routledge, 2006), 50–1.
20. Doug Balder and Evelyn Reilly, interview with author, 12 December 2014.
21. The data are based on Evelyn Reilly's presentation at the roundtable "Creating Moscow's New Jewish Museum: An Interdisciplinary Conversation." Association of Jewish Studies Annual Conference, Boston, 15–17 December 2013.
22. Hebrew and Yiddish were used primarily in the "Shtetl" and "Judaism – a Living Religion" exhibits.
23. There are other smaller and more traditional Jewish museums in Russia, including the Museum of Jewish History in Russia (see essay by Kaspina and Kazovsky in this issue), the Jewish exhibition at the Russian Museum of Ethnography (see essay by Iakerson and Shcherbakova in this issue), and the Memorial Synagogue in the Poklonnaia Gora complex (see Olga Gershenson, "Jewish Moscow – a Guidebook," *AJS Perspectives* (Spring 2010): 38–9).
24. Doug Balder, interview with author, 12 December 2014.
25. For more images and information about museum's displays, see its website – <http://www.jewish-museum.ru> – and its catalog: Borukh Gorin, ed., *Atlas Istorii Evreev Rossii: Po Materialam Evreiskogo Muzeia i Tsentra Tolerantnosti* (Moscow: Knizhniki and the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center, 2013).
26. Evelyn Reilly, interview with author, 12 December 2014.
27. Richard I. Cohen, "Self-Image through Objects: Toward a Social History of Jewish Art Collecting and Jewish Museums," in *The Uses of Tradition: Jewish Continuity in the Modern Era*, ed. Jack Wertheimer (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1992), 215–24.
28. See the study of the contrasting approaches of two Jewish museums in Los Angeles by Aviv and Shneer, *New Jews*, 72–107.
29. See Risa Levitt Kohn's reflections on this gallery in this issue.
30. "Postoiannaia Ekspozitsia." *Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center*, <http://www.jewish-museum.ru/about-the-museum/permanent-exhibition/> (accessed 13 May 2015).
31. On the Jewish conceptualization of time, see Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996). On the concept of sacred time, see Mircea Eliade, *Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1959).
32. "Postoiannaia Ekspozitsia." *Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center*, <http://www.jewish-museum.ru/about-the-museum/permanent-exhibition/> (accessed 13 May 2015). For further analysis of the "Shtetl" exhibit and its meaning, see Deborah Yalen's article in this issue.
33. Leonid Krieger, head guide, interview with author, 24 June 2015.
34. "Nachalo Vstrechi s Glavnym Ravvinom Rossii Berlom Lazarom."
35. It is important to note that not all of these figures fully identified as Jewish. Some, like Vladimir Vysotskii, were included mainly for their celebrity status.
36. In an interview on Russian television, Boroda pointed out how the Jewish experience of persecution makes the museum a perfect match for being a promoter of tolerance. Boroda, interview with Ekaterina Shergova.
37. For critical analysis of MOT, see Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 107–49. See also Aviv and Shneer, *New Jews*, 79–92.
38. For background, see Ilan Berman, "Why Russia Is Growing More Xenophobic," *The Atlantic*, 22 October 2013.
39. RAA only provided the museum with a system for changing content on iPads.

40. See reflections of the members of the Content Committee, especially an essay by Benjamin Nathans in this issue.
41. Benjamin Nathans, interview with author, 6 March 2015.
42. The Schneersohn Collection has been the subject of an acrimonious and drawn-out legal battle between Agudas Chasidei Chabad, the umbrella organization of the international Chabad-Lubavitch movement, and the Russian state. The Collection was moved to the museum on Putin's initiative. For background, see Paul Berger, "What I Found in Library Rebbe Schneerson Claimed as His and Why Chabad Feud Rages," *The Forward*, 21 February 2014.
43. Ganiantz, "Endaument v Rossii."
44. For a useful critique of the concept of tolerance, see Brown, *Regulating Aversion*.
45. James E. Young, *At Memory's Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); Oren Baruch Stier, *Committed to Memory: Cultural Mediations of the Holocaust* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003); Hansen-Glucklich, *Holocaust Memory*; Rotem, *Constructing Memory*.
46. For a comparative perspective on Holocaust memory in Eastern Europe, see John-Paul Himka and Joanna Beata Michlic, eds, *Bringing the Dark Past to Light: The Reception of the Holocaust in Postcommunist Europe* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013).
47. Aleida Assmann, "Memory, Individual and Collective," in *The Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis*, ed. Robert E. Goodin and Charles Tilly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 210–24.
48. Jan Assmann, "Globalization, Universalism, and the Erosion of Cultural Memory," in *Memory in a Global Age: Discourses, Practices and Trajectories*, ed. Aleida Assmann and Sebastian Conrad (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 122.
49. On Soviet treatment of the Holocaust, see Zvi Gitelman, "Politics and the Historiography of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union," in *Bitter Legacy: Confronting the Holocaust in the USSR*, ed. Zvi Gitelman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 14–43; Zvi Gitelman, "Soviet Reactions to the Holocaust, 1945–1991," in Lucian 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, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1993), 3–27.
50. On universalization, see Karel C. Berkhoff, "'Total Annihilation of the Jewish Population': The Holocaust in the Soviet Media, 1941–45," *Kritika* 10, no. 1 (2009): 477–504; Kiril Feferman, *Soviet Jewish Stepchild: The Holocaust in the Soviet Mindset, 1941–1964* (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag Dr Müller, 2009); Olga Gershenson, *The Phantom Holocaust: Soviet Cinema and Jewish Catastrophe* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2013).
51. For a discussion of externalization, see Gershenson, *The Phantom Holocaust*, 2.
52. Natalia Konradova and Anna Ryleva, "Geroi i Zhertvy. Memorialy Velikoi Otechestvennoi," *Neprikosnovennyi Zapas* 2–3, nos 40–1 (2005), <http://magazines.russ.ru/nz/2005/2/ko16.html>
53. Maria Ferretti, "Nepirimirimaia Pamiat': Rossia i Voina. Zametki na Poliakh Spora na Zhguchuiu Temu," *Neprikosnovennyi Zapas* 2–3, nos 40–1 (2005), <http://magazines.russ.ru/nz/2005/2/fer8.html>; Joachim Hösler, "Chto Znachit 'Prorabotka Proshlogo'? Ob Istoriografii Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voiny v SSSR i Rossii," *Neprikosnovennyi Zapas* 2–3, nos 40–1 (2005), <http://magazines.russ.ru/nz/2005/2/he10.html>
54. Aleida Assmann, "The Holocaust – a Global Memory? Extensions and Limits of a New Memory Community," in *Memory in a Global Age: Discourses, Practices and Trajectories*, ed. Aleida Assmann and Sebastian Conrad (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 108.
55. Ilya Altman, "Memorializatsia Kholokosta v Rossii: Istoria, sovremennost', perspektivy," *Neprikosnovennyi Zapas* 2–3, nos 40–1 (2005), <http://magazines.russ.ru/nz/2005/2/alt28.html>
56. Among such exceptions are Vladimir Putin's speeches on Auschwitz liberation day at the site of Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp in 2005 and at the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center in 2015. In both cases, however, Putin adhered to the Soviet/Russian approach to the Holocaust. In his 2005 speech, he did not mention Jews at all. ("Vystuplenie na

- Forume ‘Zhizn’ Narodu Moemu!’ Posviaschenom Pamiati Zhertv Osventsima,” *President of Russia*, <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22800> [accessed 12 May 2015]). In 2015, Putin did talk about Jewish victims of the Holocaust, but his main emphasis was on the heroism of ethnic Russians. He was careful to avoid any mention of collaboration or antisemitism in Russia, discussing only Ukrainian and Baltic collaborators with the Nazis. (“Mezhdunarodnyi Den’ Pamiati Zhertv Kholokosta,” *President of Russia*, <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47529> [accessed 12 May 2015]).
57. Meir, “The Place of Polish Jewry,” 112–13.
 58. Ibid.
 59. Anna Shternshis, *When Sonia Met Boris: Oral History of Jewish Life under Stalin* (Oxford University Press, in press).
 60. “RSFSR,” in *Kholocaust na Territorii SSSR: Entsiklopediia*, ed. Ilya Altman (Moscow: Rosspen, 2009), 871–5.
 61. John-Paul Himka and Joanna Beata Michlic, “Introduction,” in Himka and Michlic, *Bringing the Dark Past*, 7, 17.
 62. Doug Balder, interview with author, 12 December 2014.
 63. Doug Balder and Evelyn Reilly, interview with author, 12 December 2014.
 64. Boroda, interview with Ekaterina Shergova.
 65. Ilya Faibisovich, “My Rabotaem ne s Ogurtsami, a s Det’mi,” *Snob*, 19 February 2013, <http://snob.ru/selected/entry/57637> [accessed 14 June 2015].