

## The Willing Amnesia

### THE HOLOCAUST IN POST-SOVIET CINEMA

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In November 2013, a ten-part drama series, *Cry of an Owl* [*Krik sovy*], premiered on Russian Channel One. Everything about the series suggested a position of cultural prominence: Channel One is the main state outlet, its content is understood to be endorsed by the regime and it is distributed throughout post-Soviet space. The series had the highest production values, directed by award-winning filmmaker Oleg Pogodin, and starred Sergei Puskepalis, Maria Mironova and other A-list Russian actors. *Cry of an Owl* was an instant popular and critical success, becoming one of the highest-rated TV productions of the time (see Kondrashev 2013).

Genre-wise, the series is a standard-edition police drama, a tightly-wound whodunit; but thematically, it is a historical excursion into early post-Stalin Russia, with the KGB officer Mitin (Puskepalis) as a main character. Such a loaded historic subject invites broader questions of memory, specifically the twin catastrophes of Stalin's and Hitler's regimes. The way *Cry of an Owl* deals with the still explosive legacy of Stalinism aligns with the party line in Putin's Russia: the plot pays only lip-service to the commemoration of Stalin's secret police crimes. The KGB man is not only a leading character, but a charismatic and positive one. Although his love interest has been herself a victim of Stalin's repressions, the punitive apparatus overall comes out well. The film suggests that Stalin's secret police might have gone overboard, but the new cadre, KGB officers and their colleagues in the police forces, are all represented as solid good guys.<sup>1</sup> Instead of grappling with the difficult past, the series is nostalgic about the good old Soviet times,

with its supposedly clear moral compass. No wonder the series received an FSB (formerly KGB) film prize.<sup>2</sup>

The series' approach to war crimes and the Holocaust is equally significant. By digging into the mysterious past of a Russian provincial town, Mitin discovers an entire German spy ring. Several inhabitants are suspected to have been on the German payroll since the Nazi occupation, participating in heinous crimes, including actions against the Jews. In the course of a lengthy investigation, with many false leads and dead ends, Mitin finally arrives at a Nazi archive, where he discovers documents incriminating local Nazi collaborators and informers. It was not just a few people, it turns out, but nearly everyone in town who was implicated in the crimes.

And this is where the plot takes a curious turn: defying our expectation for a trial or a public denunciation, Mitin simply chooses to let the sleeping dogs lie. In making this choice, he is influenced by an old janitor, who serves as a philosopher and a moral compass (and is likely the filmmakers' mouthpiece). The janitor finds the archive in Mitin's room and burns it, explaining to Mitin in an impassioned monologue: 'No need to dig in the past... Who needs the truth? Who would want to know that their father or grandfather was a traitor or an executioner? Do you want such a truth?' This wilful disposal of the past is presented as a moral choice, since in the final scene of the series Mitin, who discovered a copy of an archive on microfilm, still conceals it from everyone. He literally hides it in his closet, and life carries on as if the incriminating documents had never existed. This closeted archive is an apt metaphor for the culture of memory in Russia today. 'Who needs the truth?' the series asks, and emphatically answers: nobody. This call for suppression of all kinds of historic memory is readily extended to crimes perpetuated by the Soviet regime, by Nazi occupation and, importantly, to the various victims of these crimes, including Jews, who were killed with active help of local collaborators and passive acquiescence of bystanders. As Aleida Assmann observes, in contrast to the Western world, Russian attitudes to its traumatic past are characterised by 'a tendency to oblivion ... forgetting the history' (2014). The Russian answer to the painful questions of historic responsibility is amnesia. Significantly, it is a willing amnesia.

This culture of amnesia suggested by *Cry of an Owl* might not be the only approach to collective memory in Russia, but it is certainly the dominant one.<sup>3</sup> What does this mean for the state of Holocaust memory in Russia? What are the perceptions of the Holocaust in current Russia? Exploring these questions in this essay, I will rely on analyses of recent Russian films.

## THE SOVIET HERITAGE

The received wisdom is that the Holocaust simply was not represented on Soviet screens – that there were no Holocaust films 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 denied the Holocaust or formally banned its commemoration, in actuality any attempt to speak of Jewish victims was silenced. The Holocaust was not to be treated as a unique and separate phenomenon.<sup>4</sup> Instead, the Holocaust was universalised or externalised. In the process of universalisation, the Holocaust was subsumed as part of the overall Soviet tragedy, with Jewish victims euphemistically labeled 'peaceful Soviet citizens'.<sup>5</sup> 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 have elsewhere called 'externalisation'.<sup>6</sup> To silence discussion of the Holocaust, these two mechanisms were used in tandem: universalisation allowed the Soviets to cast Slavs and communists as the main target of Hitler's attack and to erase Jewish victimhood; externalisation was used to avoid any implication of local bystanders or Nazi collaborators, and it absolved the Soviet leadership from any historic responsibility for mass Jewish losses on their soil.

As a result, there was no official commemoration of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, some cultural producers attempted to acknowledge and commemorate the Holocaust, even in the face of official silencing. Their artistic output includes a number of films, which were produced and distributed (or not) in constant negotiation with Soviet censorship.

Paradoxically, Soviet filmmakers were among the first in the world to portray Jewish persecution. In the late 1930s, several Soviet dramas, including *Professor Mamlock* (1938), directed by Herbert Rappaport and Adolf Minkin, and *The Oppenheim Family* [*Sem'ia Oppengeim*] (1938), directed by Grigorii Roshal, explicitly attacked Nazi anti-Semitism. All were banned in 1939, following the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. *The Unvanquished* [*Nepokorennye*] (1945), directed by Mark Donskoi, was among the first films ever to portray a Jewish massacre on Soviet soil, but it was taken off screens soon after its premiere, at the time of Stalin's anti-Semitic policies. Most Holocaust-themed films in the Soviet Union were made in the period of post-Stalin liberalisation, including *Ordinary Fascism* [*Obyknovennyi fashizm*] (1966), directed by Mikhail Romm, *Eastern Corridor* [*Vostochnyi koridor*] (1966), directed by Valentin Vinogradov, *Commissar* (1967), directed by Aleksandr Aksol'dov, and *Sons of the Fatherland* [*Syny otechestva*] (1968), directed by Latif Faiziev. However, even during these relatively liberal times, such films faced opposition by the Soviet regime. Banned outright or marked as 'undesirable' by the censors, most remained phantoms, forgotten or entirely unknown. At the end of the liberal era in the late 1960s, Jewish-themed cultural production was terminated altogether. The Holocaust would not openly become a subject of Soviet films again until the Perestroika era, in the late 1980s, when several such films were made, including *Ladies' Tailor* [*Damskii Portnoi*] (1990), directed by Leonid Gorovets, *Our Father* [*Otche Nash*] (1990), directed by Boris Ermolaev, and *Exile* [*Izgoi*] (1991), directed by Vladimir

Savel'ev. Yet even these films were barely seen and the Holocaust remained a phantom on the late Soviet screens (see Gershenson 2013: 206–16).

These Soviet-era films were the products of their time. In Soviet films, the Holocaust rarely assumed a central position in the narrative. The fact of Jewish suffering was used to address something else: the entirety of the Soviet people, the sweeping narrative of the war, or even a critique of Soviet totalitarianism. Representation of the Holocaust in these films was limited by the prevailing Soviet policies of universalisation and externalisation. It was further restricted by the tenets of socialist realism, demanding a lacquered portrayal of reality with positive heroes and clear plots. Finally, due to the erasure of Jewish tradition in the Soviet Union, Christian symbolism was deployed in these films along with, or even instead of, Judaism (see Gershenson 2013: 223–8). This Soviet legacy cast its long shadow on representations of the Holocaust even in post-Soviet cinema.

### HOLOCAUST FILMS IN POST-SOVIET RUSSIA

At the end of 1991, the Soviet Union was dissolved. Along with the state, the entire Soviet film industry ceased to exist. By the early 2000s, filmmaking gradually bounced back, and several Holocaust films were made. But this was not necessarily a cause for celebration – the treatment of the Holocaust in these films was heavy-handed, simplistic and sentimentalised. A Belarus/German co-production, *Babi Yar* (2003), directed by Jeff Kanew, set in occupied Kiev, is supposed to be a tragic story of a Jewish family and their non-Jewish neighbours, but its dramaturgy and unconvincing acting turn it into cheap melodrama. Another *Babi Yar*, a TV film, made in Ukraine and directed by Nikolai Zaseev-Rudenko in 2002, tells a story of a Jewish woman, a survivor of Babi Yar, who comes to visit the site of the atrocity many years later. Improbably, there she encounters a former Nazi who also came to visit, and the two share a bizarre vision of Madonna as they partake in bouts of grandiloquence. Another female survivor is featured in a Russian/American co-production, *The Burning Land* [*V liune 41*] (2003), directed by Mikhail Ptashuk. This survivor – a young American Jew, who went to visit the old country at the wrong time – not only miraculously escapes, but also manages to return to the United States, where she transforms her adventures into a Broadway musical. Unlike these films, a Lithuanian/German co-production, *Ghetto* (2006), directed by Audrius Juzenas, is based on a solid dramaturgical source, a play by Joshua Sobol set in the Vilnius ghetto, but the resulting film is also simplistic and melodramatic.

The events of the Holocaust are reflected in the subplots of several later films, the best of them being *Daddy* [*Papa*] (2004), directed by Vladimir Mashkov, which features a heartbreaking scene of an execution in the Tulchin ghetto.

In 2008, Russian state-owned Channel One broadcast a state-funded sixteen-part TV series, *Heavy Sand* [*Tiazhelyi Pesok*], directed by Anton Barshevskii, based on Anatolii

Rybakov's novel of the same name. The novel was for years one of the very few works of Soviet literature that gave expression to Jewish history and culture. At the centre of the epic plot is the life story of a Jewish couple, Rakhil and Yakov, set in a *shtetl* of Snovsk (the actual place where Rybakov spent his childhood). The last episodes of the series are dedicated to the horrors of life in the ghetto, where Rakhil loses her beloved husband and two children. At a key moment, when the ghetto is faced with liquidation, Rakhil becomes a resistance leader and organises the escape from the ghetto. This series could have become a seminal representation of Jewish life and the Holocaust, but instead it does not manage to convey the gravity of the situation and the complexity of its characters, representing Jews with idealised simplicity. This idealisation revisits the tenets of socialist realism, only now, instead of workers and revolutionaries, Jews are model citizens and exemplary human beings. In Russia, the series was aptly dubbed 'Very Heavy Sand' (see Gershenson 2013: 220–1).

In a radical departure from Soviet times, the Holocaust in the early twenty-first century becomes a subject of several important documentary films, presenting for the first time testimonies of Russian Holocaust survivors. *David* (2002), directed by Aleksei Fedorchenko, offers a portrait of a Jewish man who survived medical experiments in a Nazi concentration camp only to be thrown into a Gulag after his liberation and return to the Soviet motherland. Naturally, the film reveals painful parallels between the two totalitarian regimes. *Children from the Abyss* [*Deti iz bezdny*] (2002), directed by Pavel Chukhrai as a part of the internationally produced mini-series *Broken Silence*, weaves together testimonies, archival photographs and documents to tell harrowing stories of Russian Jews who survived the Holocaust as children. More recently, a TV documentary *Kiselev List* [*Spisok Kiseleva*] (2008), directed by Iurii Maliugin, paid tribute to a Russian partisan, Nikolai Kiselev, who led to safety over two hundred Jews who had escaped extermination in occupied Belarus. The film's main achievement is its moving interviews with actual survivors saved by Kiselev; but its one-dimensional representation of partisans as heroes glosses over real tensions between Jews and non-Jewish partisans and civilians.

All these films differ radically from the ones made during the Soviet era. With censorship restrictions completely removed, these films no longer universalise: they speak openly about the Jewish identity of their characters and about the persecutions Jews faced. Similarly, instead of externalising the Holocaust, they locate the events in the Soviet territories; some of them even cautiously addressed instances of local anti-Semitism and collaboration with the Nazis. It became more common to encounter minor Jewish characters or Holocaust references in war dramas. The discourse of the Holocaust was no longer taboo. And yet, the Soviet legacy was not completely exorcised. Ironically, the very representation of the Holocaust is also a part of the Soviet legacy of 'issue films', as is the application of a socialist realist method to idealise Jewish characters. Unfortunately,

representing the Holocaust openly, without relying on hints and hidden messages, did not result in quality films.

## HOLOCAUST FILMS IN 'NEW RUSSIA': RULES AND EXCEPTIONS

Cinematic representation of the Holocaust in the early post-Soviet years was limited both by Soviet legacy and by current realities of film production. Still, the fact that the Holocaust finally became a relatively common subject was itself significant. In the 2010s, new tendencies set in. In 2012, the mini-series *Life and Fate* [Zhizn' i Sud'ba] premiered on Channel One, and became an instant post-Soviet classic. Directed by Sergei Ursuliak, the prominent filmmaker known for his interest in history and memory, the series is a well-done adaptation of Vasilii Grossman's seminal novel of the same name. This novel, seized by the KGB in 1960 and published in Russia only in 1988, is an epic narrative of life in Stalin's Russia, told through the story of a Jewish scientist, Victor Shtrum, and his family. Naturally, the war and the Holocaust play an important role in this story. But in the twelve-part dramatisation, the events of the Holocaust are only referenced in a four-minute scene, when Shtrum (Sergei Makovetskii) receives the last letter from his mother who perished in a death camp. Yet the events of the Holocaust remain off-screen: the camera shows only Shtrum crying as he reads the letter (which is narrated by a male voice). Only for a few brief moments, archival black-and-white footage of deportations and torture of Jews is superimposed on the pages of the letter. But these images are vague and function only as signifiers of the tragic events. As a result, the events of the Holocaust that constitute one of the central themes in the novel are not individualised through characters and are not developed on-screen.<sup>7</sup> The choice to omit almost entirely such an important part of the novel suggests a new turn to the obfuscation of the Holocaust. This scene might have been filmed in Soviet times. In 2013, Channel One followed with *Cry of an Owl*, which gives an even more explicit answer to the question of Holocaust memory: amnesia.

Although the Holocaust has fallen out of fashion in the Russian film industry, there are exceptions. Two recent independent Russian films, the short *Shoes* [Tufel'ki] (2013), directed by Costa Fam, and the documentary *Holocaust: Is It Wallpaper Paste?* [Kholokost – klei dlia oboev] (2013), directed by Mumin Shakirov, focus on the memory of the Holocaust. Significantly, both caused strong reactions at home and have circulated at film festivals abroad. These two films, and the high profile they achieved (rare for shorts and documentaries), make a fascinating case-study of Holocaust representations in contemporary Russia, and of its successes and failures.

### *Holocaust: Is It Wallpaper Paste?*

The premise of this documentary sounds like a joke: Evgenia and Ksenia Karatygin, twin



sisters competing in the *Insanely Beautiful* Russian reality show, get stumped by a question: 'What is the Holocaust?' The sisters grapple for the answer: 'Holocaust, it doesn't ring a bell. Maybe it's something related to office supplies... Or perhaps some household product...' Out of their depth, they start guessing: 'Holocaust is wallpaper paste.'

A clip depicting this debacle went viral on YouTube. In a matter of days, half a million people watched it. Among the viewers captivated by this moment was Mumin Shakirov, a Moscow-based filmmaker, who at that time worked for Radio Svoboda (Radio Liberty), a US-backed broadcaster providing alternative news and information about Eastern Europe. Shakirov sensed an opportunity to raise Holocaust awareness, and immediately invited the twins to his studio for a conversation with Alla Gerber, a Holocaust educator, which was turned into a TV show. The success of this broadcast gave Shakirov the idea to take the girls on a trip to Auschwitz and document it on film. He told me that part of his inspiration was the story of Jade Goody, the late British reality TV star, who became famous for demonstrating incredible gaps in her most basic general knowledge, generating a debate about education and class in the UK. Shakirov saw the Karatygin sisters as Russian Jade Goodies, whose equally shocking gaps in knowledge about world history might start an important conversation.

Shakirov's documentary opens with observational footage that, in its visual quality, resembles reality TV. It culminates in the scene with the sisters' faux pas. Then, the documentary seemingly shifts genres, and from a reality show transforms into a road movie, as the camera documents Evgenia and Ksenia's journey to Auschwitz. The journey is intercut with interviews with the girls and conversations with their mother, which function as flashbacks to their childhood in a provincial Russian town. The girls are conventionally pretty, but unremarkable; as is their desire to be famous. Their upbringing is equally unremarkable, though marred by the loss of their father to illness. After they move to Moscow for college, they start auditioning for reality TV shows, until they become famous for not knowing what the Holocaust is.

It is quite clear that at first they do not see their performance as a problem – they admit to making no attempt after their appearance in the show to find out about the Holocaust, or to understand why their answer provoked controversy. For them, this scandal is, as they put it, another 'moment of fame'. They gladly accept an invitation to go to Auschwitz – a trip abroad – as an opportunity for excellent PR. An observational-style camera captures their bug-eyed enthusiasm and puppy-like innocence. At first, we watch the sisters with disbelief, but they are so warm and good-natured that we, the audience, start sympathising with them. On a train to Poland, they speak excitedly about getting ready for a trip – receiving passports, holding foreign money for the first time. Nothing prepares them for the actual destination.

The most instructive moments of the film are interviews with the girls' mother and their schoolteacher. The mother, an older working-class woman, admits that neither she

nor her neighbours have ever heard of 'this Holocaust'. But the history teacher, younger and more educated than the mother, is embarrassed to the point of being defensive. The Holocaust, according to her, was covered at school: 'Perhaps the girls just missed this class or didn't pay attention to the material.' Then she grows more contemplative, even wonders whether her lesson was memorable enough, but at the end she excuses herself – she didn't have appropriate pedagogical materials. 'Perhaps,' she says, 'one day I will get to the point of teaching an entire class session on the Holocaust. But for that I need to be ready myself. I myself first need to see something that will deeply affect me.'

The girls' mother belongs to a generation of people who came of age during the Soviet era, when commemorating the Jewish catastrophe was extremely rare. (The term 'Holocaust' itself only came into usage in Russia in the 1990s.) But the teacher's comments are more thought provoking. She is an educator, a professional historian with a university diploma, who, presumably, should have the knowledge and the tools to teach about major historical events. Her complaint that she does not have access to pedagogical resources to teach about the Holocaust is telling. The teacher even admits indirectly that she herself needs to learn more, to be more motivated before she can embark on teaching an entire class session – that is, 45 minutes – on the subject. Why is this well-meaning teacher feeling so unprepared when such a plethora of material is available online and in print? Even if Holocaust education in Russia still has a long way to go, it seems unlikely that a motivated teacher could not find material that 'deeply affects' her, be it in books, photos, films or virtual exhibits. Perhaps we can read the teacher's position as a commentary on the general absence of motivation and responsibility in Russia to deal with the lessons of the Holocaust as the central genocidal event of the twentieth century, or as a part of a particular local history.

What are the lessons that Evgenia and Ksenia finally learn when they arrive at the Auschwitz-Birkenau museum? Predictably, their naïve excitement transforms into shock as they walk among the barracks and get a guided tour through the abject exhibits. The images on screen, depicting the horrors of the camps, are familiar to Western eyes, but the girls' reaction makes them appear powerfully new. Particularly powerful is an exhibit about Dr. Mengele's experiments on twins, illustrated on screen by grotesque photographs from the museum collection. The camera closes up on the twins, as their sad faces reveal a sudden sense of empathy and identification with the victims.

After the tour, one of the girls is too overwhelmed to speak, but the other feels a new sense of mission: 'Nowadays, many people in Russia don't know about it [the Holocaust], and thanks to you [Shakirov], we are among the minority who do know ... and now it is our responsibility to tell others.' But what would they tell? The short tour is enough to bring tears to their eyes but can scarcely fill the gaps in their understanding of such a complex historical event. Still, empathy is there, which may be more important than a full grasp of history, given the current Russian climate of intolerance and xenophobia.



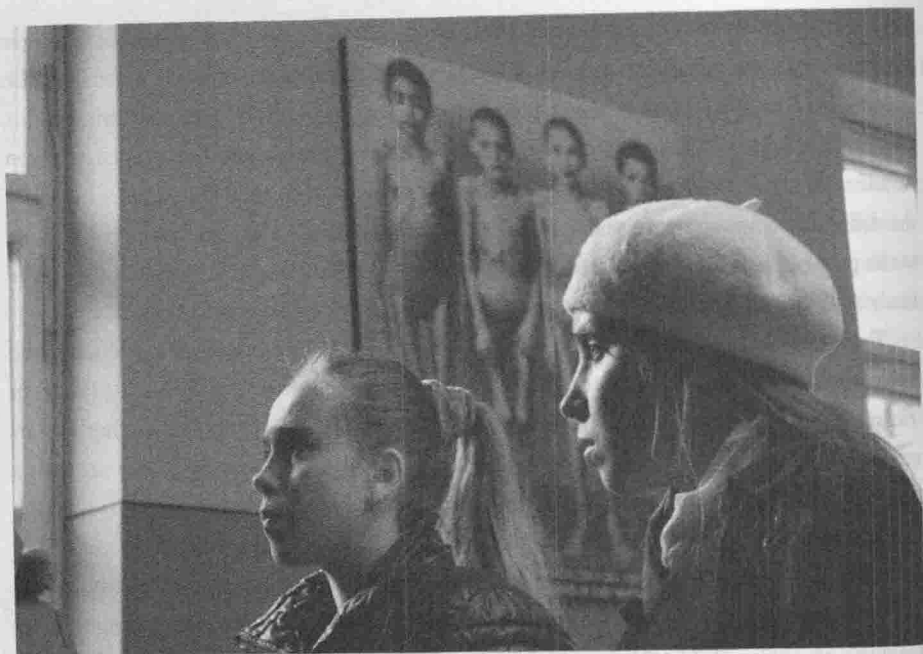


Fig. 1 Screenshot from *Holocaust: Is it Wallpaper Paste?* Courtesy of Mumin Shakirov

In fact, it is Russia's growing xenophobia that motivated Shakirov to make this documentary. Shakirov and his family are secularised Central Asian Muslims with roots in Dushanbe, in what is now Turkmenistan, members of an ethnic and religious minority who are often harassed and assaulted in Russia. In Moscow, there are riots against people from Central Asia and the Caucasus. The targets of these riots are often migrant workers, perceived as an economic and cultural threat.<sup>8</sup> Shakirov admitted to me that he is seriously concerned not only about career prospects but also about the safety of his dark-skinned sons. This concern led to his interest in the subject of the Holocaust, and his identification with Jews, the paradigmatic persecuted minority.

The increasing racism in Russia is an important context for understanding this film and the position of the filmmaker. Still, why does Shakirov take his protagonists on a tour of Auschwitz? During the war, as many as 2.6 million Jews were murdered on Nazi-occupied Soviet territory.<sup>9</sup> It is true that most victims were killed in Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova and Lithuania, former republics of the Soviet Union (of which Russia is a successor state). But even within contemporary Russian borders, former 'RSFSR' (Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic), there were dozens of ghettos and numerous sites of mass executions. Why not start the girls' Holocaust education in their home country?

For Shakirov, the answer was obvious: 'I chose Auschwitz because it's an iconic place, because it immediately signifies the Holocaust,' he told me. This choice is not surprising, given the universally recognised status of Auschwitz as 'a metonym for the Shoah' (Huener 2003: 15). But Shakirov also has a personal connection to Auschwitz: he learned

about the camp as a child and always wanted to visit the famous museum. He remembers studying about Auschwitz in school in Dushanbe. In Soviet schools, Jews were not mentioned as a historically specific victim group; instead, Auschwitz was presented as a site of Nazi crimes where people of various nationalities were exterminated. Shakirov pointed out to me that a more important influence was his father's stories. In the 1970s, when it was difficult and rare for Soviet citizens to go abroad, his father went on a tour to Poland, visited Auschwitz, and brought back books, postcards and brochures. Like the Soviet school, the tour did not focus on Jews, but the camp itself left a tremendous impression on Shakirov's father, who talked about it to young Mumin.

Just like such personal memories, cinematic representations of Auschwitz are powerful signifiers of the Shoah. Crematoriums, chimneys, piles of hair and photos of skeletal victims constitute the core Holocaust imagery and provide evidence of the Nazi crimes. And yet, the ready cinematic value of Auschwitz does not provide the full answer to a question: why focus on Auschwitz in a Russian Holocaust documentary? Another part of the answer is the legacy of Soviet externalisation of the Holocaust.

As mentioned above, the policy of externalisation during the Soviet era had significant consequences for Holocaust iconography, which relied predominantly on familiar camp imagery (see Gershenson 2013: 161, 209–10, 224). Such representation combined 'the best of both worlds': it passed the approval of the censors and gave filmmakers an effective visual shortcut for representing the Holocaust. It was politically appropriate – in accordance with the party line, it located the Holocaust outside Soviet borders and omitted the subject of the executions of Jews in Soviet territory during the war, thus conveniently avoiding the difficult questions of local collaboration and historic responsibility.

The process of taking historic responsibility is painful. Such a process of soul-searching not only by the first, but also by the second generation of perpetrators and bystanders took place in Germany and is arguably starting to take place in Poland, but it has not yet begun in Russia.<sup>10</sup> At the moment, nothing indicates that it is likely to happen. Shakirov's sensitive and thoughtful documentary is more evidence of the continual Soviet legacy of externalising the Holocaust. Yes, the film shows the girls' shock and awe at learning about the heinous crimes of Nazism. But these historic crimes lie entirely outside the realm of their experience; they took place in an entirely different era and, according to the logic of the film, in a foreign land. The girls come back to Moscow as shocked travellers, with a mission 'to tell others'. But they are not required to look into their own community's past. The Holocaust is conveniently externalised, even exoticised. It is not clear if the girls come into contact with actual Jews in their everyday lives, or even know what being Jewish means, or if they draw parallels with other religious or cultural 'others' who face xenophobia in contemporary Russia. Through the Karatygin sisters, their mother and their teacher, the film exposes alarming gaps in the historical

knowledge of contemporary Russian youth and adults, but Shakirov does not attempt to probe and explore these gaps.

Shakirov's film, then, both disrupts and perpetuates the Soviet legacy. The Holocaust in the film is not universalized – it is a subject of direct conversation. Moreover, the film challenges the current climate of historical amnesia in Russia, exposing and problematising the fact that many people in Russia do not know, or do not care to know, about the Holocaust. At the same time, the Holocaust is still presented in this film as a historic event that took place elsewhere, and that does not concern Russian citizens. One may have a good cry visiting a tragic foreign site, then return home to business as usual, with no reason to ask probing questions about your own society. The Holocaust and other genocidal crimes are separated from everyday life by the safe distance of time and space. Unsurprisingly, Shakirov's film ends, literally, on a happy note: back in Moscow after their gruelling trip, the girls belt out a pop song about a mother's love, as their own mother greets them with flowers.

### Shoes

A few months before the Karatygin sisters became a YouTube sensation, Dmitrii Parshkov, a friend of filmmaker Costa (Konstantin) Fam, was visiting Auschwitz. After seeing the museum exhibits – piles of suitcases, glasses, shoes – Parshkov called Fam with an idea: to tell a story of the Holocaust through one pair of shoes, from the storefront to the museum vitrine. 'I was jolted,' recalls Fam, 'to express the tragedy of millions in one sentence!' (2013). Fam grew up in Ukraine as the son of a Vietnamese immigrant father and a Jewish mother; in other words, he is an heir to death and violence on both sides of his family, and he knows first-hand what it means to be a member of an ethnic and religious minority. When he was growing up in the Soviet Union, he experienced harassment as both an Asian and a Jew. Since he was a film student, Fam felt that the Holocaust was 'his' subject. The day after Parshkov's phone call, Fam told me, he wrote the first draft of *Shoes*. The resulting film is a Russian-Belarus-Czech co-production, supported by the Auschwitz museum.

In a span of 18 minutes, the camera follows a young Jewish girl, or rather her feet, as she buys beautiful red shoes, falls in love, gets married, has a child, and then loses all she has when the Nazis invade. Her husband, betrayed by a local collaborator, is taken to the gas chambers at Auschwitz. Presumably, she meets the same fate, as at the end of the film we see the same pretty red pumps, now worn down and wrinkled, among the famous exhibit of a pile of shoes, signifying all that is left from the murder of millions. To drive the point home, the camera only shows us the characters' feet, never their faces, as if their humanity was gone even before they were reduced to piles of objects. The film ends, perhaps not happily, but at least on a redemptive note: the now aged collaborator



Fig. 2 Screenshot from *Shoes*.  
Courtesy of Costa Fam

comes to pay his tribute to the deceased at the Auschwitz museum. Ironically, he is the only character who is shown in full.

The point of Fam's film is to tell an affecting story. Although the film is premised on a gimmick, as the director himself admits, it succeeds in painting a tragedy in broad strokes: a life of good people destroyed by the brutal force of Nazism. Competent cinematography results in poignant, albeit predictable, and palatable images. The problem is that, in telling this emotional story completely stripped of historical details, the filmmaker inadvertently taps into the Soviet legacy, most significantly that of externalising the Holocaust.

The film is set at an undefined place, presumably somewhere in Europe. Aside from ambient music, the film is silent: there is no dialogue, and hence no language to identify the characters and the location. Nostalgic images on screen depict a kind of a *shtetl*, with markets, horses, wells and a Jewish wedding, complete with breaking the glass and circle dancing. Then, the happy couple goes on a honeymoon to Paris, instantly transformed from barefoot peasants into sophisticated bourgeois tourists. The picture is vague, but one thing is clear: the action does not take place in the Soviet Union. Stalin's regime curtailed foreign travel, and so Soviet Jews did not vacation in Paris, nor did they live in places untouched by the Soviet regime. Instead of an actual historical reality, the film depicts our ideas of pre-war European Jewish life. This historical and geographical abstraction continues to externalise the Holocaust: as in Soviet times, it remains an event that took place elsewhere, or nowhere in particular, but certainly not in occupied Soviet territories.

There is another important way in which the film's depiction of the Holocaust reveals an uncomfortable parallel with the Soviet past. As mentioned above, throughout Soviet history, the Holocaust was largely silenced. Foreign Holocaust films were rarely, if ever, shown there, and Soviet films were too scarce to develop a visual language for representing the Jewish catastrophe. The significant debate about the limits and possibilities of Holocaust representation that has taken place in the US and Europe since the 1970s did not reach the Soviet Union.<sup>11</sup> The parameters of this debate, especially its critical

examination of graphic and sentimentalised depictions of violence, remained unknown to most Russian filmmakers and audiences.

The scene in *Shoes* depicting death inside the gas chamber is a case in point. On screen, dozens of bare feet shuffle, advancing, quiet and orderly, in a bluish luminous light. Melancholy instrumental music turns it into a spiritual symbolic scene. Here the abstract approach to history backfires, as the violent, abject deaths of the victims are turned on screen into a sentimentalised symbol. This aestheticisation of suffering dehumanises victims of Nazi violence, even though the film specifically seeks to memorialise them.

Moreover, it is problematic to represent the Holocaust through the perspective of footwear. The red shoes are an easily-recognisable allusion to *Schindler's List*, where a little girl in a red coat stands out in a black-and-white frame. As in Spielberg's highly successful film, the camera's obsessive focus on this red spot, contrasting the monochromatic world of the picture, creates a sensationalist and sentimental image.

In important ways, *Shoes* is out of sync with its time. Today, it is no longer sufficient simply to state that the terrible events occurred and to elicit empathy for the victims. The best international Holocaust cinema now strives to tell a particular story, to find an authentic perspective, to avoid emotional manipulation and, most importantly, to raise issues related to memory and responsibility, especially of second- and even third-generation victims and perpetrators. This is the case, for instance, with the Polish film *Aftermath* [*Pokłosie*] (2012), directed by Władysław Pasikowski. Here, the main characters, two Poles, gradually uncover the extent to which their community was implicated in the murder of local Jews during the Nazi occupation. They find out that nearly everyone was implicated. The great accomplishment of the film is that it shows what kind of resistance, including physical violence, the two protagonists face even today. Probing the past is painful, as the reception of *Aftermath* in Poland confirmed: it provoked criticism from ethno-nationalists for tarnishing the Polish reputation, while others rallied behind the film. *Aftermath* started a national conversation about the role of ordinary Poles during the Holocaust (see Grollmus 2013). By contrast, *Shoes* tells a feel-good Holocaust story: Jews are good, Nazis are bad, and even a collaborator repents: there are no challenging questions and no uncomfortable revelations.

By relying on a gimmick, and by avoiding particular stories grounded in an actual historical and cultural context, the film avoids dealing with uncomfortable subjects of historic responsibility. Even as Soviet censorship ended in the late 1980s, its power seemingly extended into the future: the history of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union continues to be largely unrepresented. For Russians, this is safer, as it allows them to avoid the shocks that may arise from asking difficult questions about elderly neighbours or grandparents. It is easier to locate the Holocaust story in a nostalgic never-neverland, depict brutal death as an ascension into the light, and focus on an unusual angle – literally, a

camera angle on the shoes. This allows the film to begin nowhere in particular, and to end in Auschwitz, rather than Kiev, Minsk or Smolensk.

*Shoes* had already had a triumphant run on Russian and European film festivals, and at several Jewish film festivals in North America. Emboldened by its success, Fam is now working on two sequels to *Shoes*, which, taken together, will form a feature-length trilogy titled *Witnesses* [*Svideteli*]. As Fam explained to me, the second part of the trilogy will present the Holocaust through the perspective of a dog raised by a Jewish owner that is later taken to guard a concentration camp. The final part will trace the history of a violin made in pre-war Nuremberg which finds its way to a concert near the Wailing Wall in present-day Jerusalem. It is unclear whether these short films will overcome the limitations in portraying the Holocaust evident in *Shoes*.

### FROM AMNESIA TO REMEMBRANCE?

Post-Soviet films stand in marked contrast to those completed or attempted during the Soviet era. And yet, the Soviet legacy of silencing the Holocaust continues. This is part of a larger problem: memory work is still not done in Russia.

Within memory studies, there is a tradition that theorises three distinct aspects of collective memory: communicative, cultural and political (see Assmann 2006). Communicative memory has a limited time scope – two or three generations – and is based predominantly on everyday communication; cultural memory, on the other hand, extends for a longer period, and can be expressed through formal commemorations (texts, ceremonies and monuments) and practices of observance around them. Cultural memory is carried out by various bearers, such as historians, media and educators. Finally, as Jan Assmann has suggested (2010: 122), an externalised symbolic aspect of cultural memory carried out by top-down institutions becomes identified as political memory. Collective memory in the Soviet Union, and later in Russia, has excluded the memory of the Holocaust on all three levels.

This lack of Holocaust memorialisation in Russia has historic explanations. First, in the immediate post-war years, the events of the Holocaust were largely prohibited from discussion in the Soviet Union (see Gitelman 1993). This prohibition stymied the transmission of personal memory and, unlike in other countries, communicative memory of the Holocaust has never formed.

Second, the Holocaust never became a part of cultural memory. Throughout the Soviet era, any attempts to memorialise the Holocaust through monuments, literary texts, art and media were completely or partially censored. The memory of the Holocaust was subsumed by the memory of the Great Patriotic War. 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 (see Konradova and Ryleva 2005). Moreover,



today this Soviet-style approach is becoming increasingly nationalistic, playing up the regime's claim for Russia's special historic role and unique path (see Ferretti 2005). In this version of the memory of the war, there is no space for a Jewish catastrophe.

Finally, regarding political memory, the state has failed to acknowledge and memorialise the Holocaust. It is noteworthy that Russia, like Belarus and Ukraine, is not a member of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), even though the events of the Holocaust took place on its territory. With few exceptions, there is no official commemoration of the Holocaust through major museums, rites or other practices; the Holocaust is not a part of state-authorised school curricula, and outside of the efforts of the Moscow-based Holocaust Center there is no formalised training of teachers on the subject (see Altman 2005).

Russia's most striking failure is that the Holocaust in that country is still interpreted as an internal Jewish affair, with limited relevance to anyone else. By contrast, in the Western world, the Holocaust is an event of universal history, a paradigmatic genocide, a crisis of modernity with repercussions for all citizens of the world.<sup>12</sup> Some historians go as far as to ask, 'Can countries or civilizations that do not acknowledge the Holocaust develop universalistic political moralities' and affirm 'the uniqueness and sacredness of the Holocaust as a touchstone of universal moral maturity?' (cited in Assmann 2010: 108). Those are the questions that Russia must face.

Russia lives in a state of willing amnesia about the Holocaust, as well as about other aspects of its history. The crimes of Stalin's regime are still neither atoned for nor memorialised on a national level. Writing about a different cultural context, Michael Rothberg points out how memory of traumatic historic events is often perceived as a scarce resource, resulting in a zero-sum competitive approach to memorialisation. He suggests thinking of memory as a multidirectional process and a limitless resource, whereby connecting and honoring seemingly disparate catastrophes can actually result in a better understanding of them, and in a richer form of memory (2009: 1–33). This cannot be more right in the context of Russia, with its interconnected legacies of communist terror, Stalin's repressions, World War II, the Holocaust and other ethnic and religious persecutions. As Tymothy Snyder (2010) has showed, these historic events should be understood in the context of each other. In my opinion, the memories, too, should be connected. However, there is a persistent sense in Russia that memory is a zero-sum game. Not only marginal anti-Semites but even some progressive thinkers believe the Holocaust should not be memorialised in Russia as a distinct and separate event.<sup>13</sup> In their logic, Jewish victims are just a part of the larger losses of the Great Patriotic War, and it is sufficient to focus on the generalised story of the entire event.

The inertia of the Soviet discourse, which universalised and externalised the Holocaust, is still a factor – no one wants to take historic responsibility for the crimes committed on Soviet soil. The Jewish Holocaust remains an uncomfortable subject,

easier to push away than to acknowledge. This is why filmmakers like Mumin Shakirov and Costa Fam, who, despite this discomfort and amnesia, dare to deal with the subject, deserve credit. Their films, however different, have a lot in common: they rely on a gimmick in their approach to the Holocaust (the reality-show slippage in one case, the footwear angle in the other). They externalise the Holocaust by avoiding local history and setting the action at Auschwitz. But importantly, these films are both 'labours of love', initiated by the filmmakers themselves and produced on minimal budgets, with the help of private donors, Jewish organisations and crowdfunding. The two filmmakers deserve special credit for seeing their films as educational vehicles. Shakirov conducted over fifty screenings not just at festivals, but also at schools, museums and community organisations across Russia, some in collaboration with the Russian Holocaust Center. Fam is even more ambitious – once his trilogy is complete, he envisions a cross-platform outreach campaign, including curriculum development, with on- and off-line events. In the atmosphere of collective amnesia in Russia today, Shakirov's and Fam's sense of mission around their Holocaust films is cause for hope.

It is noteworthy that these two films, exceptions to the amnesia rule, were created by members of ethnic minorities in Russia, and not necessarily Jews: a Central Asian secularised Muslim in one case and a Ukrainian-born Jewish-Vietnamese in another. Both filmmakers are visibly marked as non-whites, members of persecuted minorities associated in contemporary Russia with illegal guest workers, who face hostility and marginalisation on personal, social and state levels. It is not by chance that these two filmmakers became acutely aware of their otherness in recent years, that they started thinking deeply about Jews as a persecuted minority, and about the Holocaust. The two films show, or rather hint at, the relevance of Holocaust memory in today's Russia and its adaptation to the needs of the new persecuted minorities. Perhaps this is the first indication of interpreting the Holocaust in Russia as a universal event that has a lasting meaning for all citizens in the society, Jews and non-Jews alike.

Although the two films are problematic in the way they continue the Russian tendencies to externalise the Holocaust, they hold the potential to make Russians begin looking at the Holocaust directly. As a first step, this may encourage young Russians (and their parents and teachers) at least to know what happened specifically to Jews, and begin integrating the Holocaust into everyday thought. Perhaps next, Russians may be able to turn the spotlight on themselves.

## Notes

- 1 On the proliferation of positive characters of KGB/NKVD officers on recent Russian TV, see Lipovetsky (2014).

- 2 In addition to the awards from the Russian Association of Film and TV Producers, *Cry of an Owl* was awarded first prize by the FSB for the best artistic and literary productions representing the work of the organisation.
- 3 Alternatives to amnesia are evident in the activities of the Russian historical and civil rights society 'Memorial', recording and publicising the Soviet totalitarian past and trying to memorialise its victims, and the 'Holocaust Center and Foundation', a Moscow-based organisation conducting scholarly research and publications and developing Holocaust education in Russia.
- 4 On Soviet treatment of the Holocaust, see Gitelman (1993, 1997).
- 5 On universalisation, see Arad (2001), Berkhoff (2009) and Feferman (2009).
- 6 For a discussion of externalisation, see Gershenson (2013: 2).
- 7 In contrast, the letter is a basis for a US/French co-production *The Last Letter* (2002) by the renowned filmmaker Frederick Wiseman. Similarly, in an eight-hour BBC radio drama *Life and Fate* (2011) based on the novel, the letter is thematised in an episode, and the character of the mother, played by Janet Suzman, is individualised.
- 8 For more background on this issue, see Berman (2013).
- 9 The numbers of the Holocaust victims in the USSR vary, depending on how and in which borders they are calculated. Here, I am relying on Yitzhak Arad's estimate in his *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union* (2009: 525).
- 10 For background on *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in Germany, see Niven (2001). On Poland, see Huener (2003: 227–47) and Abrosewicz-Jacobs (2010).
- 11 For a brief overview of the debate, see Baron (2005: 10–22).
- 12 On the perception of the Holocaust as a universal event, see Assmann and Conrad (2010: 8). On the perception of the Holocaust in Russia, see Kukulin (forthcoming).
- 13 See, for instance, an interview with Leonid Katsva (2013), a famous history teacher in Russia.

## Filmography

- Aftermath* [Pokłosie]. Dir. Władysław Pasikowski. Poland, 2012.
- Babi Yar*. Dir. Jeff Kanew. Germany/Belarus, 2003.
- Babi Yar*. Dir. Nikolai Zaseev-Rudenko. Ukraine, 2002.
- The Burning Land* [V liune 4I]. Dir. Mikhail Ptashuk. Russia/USA, 2003.
- Children from the Abyss* [Deti iz bezdny]. Dir. Pavel Chukhrai. Russia, 2002.
- Commissar*. Dir. Aleksandr Askol'dov. Soviet Union, 1967.
- Cry of an Owl* [Krik sovy]. Dir. Oleg Pogodin. Russia, 2013.
- David*. Dir. Aleksei Fedorchenko. Russia, 2002.
- Eastern Corridor* [Vostochnyi koridor]. Dir. Valentin Vinogradov. Soviet Union, 1966.
- Exile* [Izgoi]. Dir. Vladimir Savel'ev. Soviet Union, 1991.
- Ghetto*. Dir. Audrius Juzenas. Lithuania/Germany, 2006.
- Heavy Sand* [Tiazhelyi Pesok]. Dir. Anton Barshevskii. Russia, 2008.
- Holocaust: Is It Wallpaper Paste?* [Kholokost—klei dlia oboev]. Dir. Mumin Shakirov. Russia, 2013.
- Ladies' Tailor* [Damskii Portnoi]. Dir. Leonid Gorovets. Soviet Union, 1990.
- The Last Letter*. Dir. Frederick Wiseman. USA/France, 2002.
- The Oppenheim Family* [Sem'ia Oppengeim]. Dir. Grigorii Roshal. Soviet Union, 1938.
- Ordinary Fascism* [Obyknoennyi fashizm]. Dir. Mikhail Romm. Soviet Union, 1966.

- Our Father* [Otche Nash]. Dir. Boris Ermolaev. Soviet Union, 1990.
- Professor Mamlock*. Dir. Herbert Rappaport and Adolf Minkin. Soviet Union, 1938.
- Shoes* [Tufel'ki]. Dir. Costa Fam. Russia, 2013.
- Sons of the Fatherland* [Syny otechestva]. Dir. Latif Faiziev. Soviet Union, 1968.
- The Unvanquished* [Nepokorennye]. Dir. Mark Donskoi. Soviet Union, 1945.

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