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Memories of an Unfulfilled Promise: Internationalism and Patriotism in Post-Soviet Oral Histories of Jewish Survivors of the Nazi Genocide

Anika Walke

Abstract: Memories of Soviet Jews who were born during the first two decades of the existence of the USSR show that the destruction of the Soviet society and its ideological tenets is central to their experience of the Nazi genocide. Elderly survivors of the Nazi genocide remember their lives based on comparative evaluations of their lives in the Soviet Union and under the Nazi regime, making a strong case for understanding memory as a relational construct. Interrogating the significance of growing up secular and Soviet for experiencing and remembering the Nazi genocide reveals that in order to understand Soviet Jews' responses to German occupation and genocide and how they remember them, we must turn to their prewar socialization as Soviet internationalists and patriots.

Keywords: Holocaust, internationalism, Jewish identity, memory, Soviet Union, youth

Samuil Volk returned to Minsk, the capital of Soviet Belorussia, from his first summer camp adventure shortly after German troops had bombed the city on June 22, 1941. German Wehrmacht troops—poised to acquire and occupy “living space” for the German people, destroy the Bolshevik regime, and, in the course of this, prepared to kill thousands of people or deport them for forced labor—speedily invaded Soviet territory and destroyed infrastructure, houses,

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and resources in the summer months of that year. Ten-year-old Samuil reacted strongly to the destruction around him: “When I was close to our house, I passed the House of Government. There used to be a Lenin statue, but now he was lying on his face, the Germans had knocked him over. I got really upset somehow, and I couldn’t go any further. I started to cry.”¹ Later on in his testimony, Volk spoke about the Nazis’ establishment of a ghetto in the midst of his hometown and the murder of his mother and several of his siblings. He revealed little about his emotional reaction to the loss of his family yet emphasized his tears at the sight of the fallen statue of one of the Soviet leaders. Why is this so?

Samuil Volk was sixty-seven years old when he was interviewed in 1998, seven years after the breakup of the Soviet Union. Remembering the beginning of the war in this stark image of a fallen monument likely reflects the impact of the similar destruction of monuments in the early 1990s, which accompanied the demise of the Soviet state in which he grew up and lived for most of his life and for which he served as a military officer for several decades. His memory thus registers both the older, deeply felt shock at the beginning of the German occupation of the Soviet Union in the 1940s and the disappointment over the end of the Soviet project in the 1990s, a dynamic that is evident in many accounts by Soviet Holocaust survivors of his generation. The memories of Soviet Jews who were born during the first decade after the USSR was founded in 1922 suggest that their socialization in Soviet society (that is their adoption of Soviet internationalism, secularism, and patriotism) is central to how they remember the Nazi genocide. When the first generation of Soviet Jews remember that the German occupation regime established a racial hierarchy and destroyed people and country, they simultaneously remember that it cut short the development of a secular, egalitarian, multinational Soviet society in the 1930s. They see the destruction of that ideal state through the lens of promises and hopes for a better future that were destroyed by war and occupation.

This article interrogates the significance of growing up secular and Soviet for experiencing and remembering the Nazi genocide, and it reveals how the

Urbana–Champaign; the East European Memory Studies Research Group/Memory at War Project at the University of Cambridge (UK); the Soviet History Reading Group at the University of Toronto; and the “Migration, Identity, State” project workshop at Washington University in St. Louis; I greatly benefited from the feedback I received in all these venues. I especially thank Kathryn Nasstrom and the three anonymous reviewers at the *Oral History Review* for their suggestions to improve my argument. All remaining errors and flaws are, of course, my responsibility. The article results from research that was made possible by, among others, the Research Fellowship of the Miles Lerman Center for the Study of Jewish Resistance, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum; a Thesis Fellowship of the Fondation pour la Mémoire de la Shoah, Paris; the University of California–Santa Cruz Chancellor’s Dissertation Year Fellowship; a Dissertation Fellowship by the Rosa-Luxemburg Foundation, Berlin; and the DAAD Go-East Research Stipend.

¹ Volk, Samuil, Interview 43231, Novosibirsk, April 15, 1997, *Visual History Archive*, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, accessed online at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum on July 23, 2010. The video testimonies archived by the USC Shoah Foundation–The Institute for Visual History and Education are accessible through a number of museums, libraries, schools, and synagogues that have received a licensed copy of the testimonies. Access sites can be located via the foundation’s website at <http://sfi.usc.edu/locator/>.

experience of the Nazi genocide affects the memory of having lived in the Soviet Union. I argue that in order to understand the response of a crucial generation (indeed, the first generation) of Soviet Jews to Nazi genocide and World War II, as well as to understand their life stories more generally, we must look to their socialization in the immediate prewar period. Subsequent periods of postwar reconstruction, Soviet state antisemitism, and post-Soviet transformations also influenced the portrayals of the Nazi genocide in survivors' accounts.² Nonetheless, an analysis of the prewar experience is essential to understand and contextualize how elderly Jews in the former Soviet Union remember relationships among and between different national groups and the role of Soviet state institutions during World War II.

The memories of elderly Jewish women and men, recorded in the late 1990s and early 2000s, of their life in the Soviet Union in general and of the Nazi genocide in particular, are distinctly shaped by the sequence of different life periods and by the narrators' ability to compare different ideological and political regimes. Much of the scholarship on the construction of memory rightly emphasizes the role of ideology and collective discourses in explaining how the past is reinterpreted in light of the present and is shaped by ideology, culture, and social relations. Luisa Passerini's work on working-class memories of Italian fascism and, more to the point of this article, Daria Khubova, Irina Sherbakova, and other scholars' work on the construction of Gulag memory in the former Soviet Union provide strong and insightful examples of this approach.³ I argue that we must also look to the sequence of distinct periods of experience, which are reinterpreted in hindsight and based on an active comparison between the different periods with regard to their impact on the interviewees' lives, to understand how memories and representations of the past are constructed. In the case at hand, the sharp contrast between Soviet policies of internationalism and equality, which

² There are different forms of spelling antisemitism, including anti-Semitism and anti-semitism. I use anti-semitism because, as Doris Bergen argues, "the use of the hyphen implies that there was such a thing as 'Semitism,' which antisemites opposed. In fact, no one who used the term in the nineteenth century (or since) ever meant it to mean anything but hatred of Jews"; see Doris Bergen, *War and Genocide: A Concise History of the Holocaust* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 4. Yehuda Bauer further clarifies that "there is no 'Semitism' one can be 'anti' to"; rather, the term antisemitism was a semantic cover for an anti-Jewish movement that emerged in the late nineteenth century in Germany; see Yehuda Bauer with Nili Keren, *A History of the Holocaust* (New York: Watts, 1982), 51f.

³ See Luisa Passerini, "Work Ideology and Consensus under Italian Fascism" (Orig. 1979), in *The Oral History Reader*, 1st ed., ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (New York/London: Routledge, 1998), 53–62; Daria Khubova et al., "After Glasnost: Oral History in the Soviet Union," in *Memory and Totalitarianism*, 3rd ed., ed. Luisa Passerini (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 89–102. My analysis of the sociality of memory is further inspired by the theoretical and methodological apparatus developed by, among others, Maurice Halbwachs, *Das Gedächtnis und seine sozialen Bedingungen* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1985); Peter Burke, "History as Social Memory," in *Memory, History, Culture and the Mind*, ed. Thomas Butler (New York: Blackwell, 1989), 97–113; Joan Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 4 (1991): 773–97; Barbara Misztal, *Theories of Social Remembering* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2003); Gabriele Rosenthal, "Die Biographie im Kontext der Familien und Gesellschaftsgeschichte," in *Biographieforschung im Diskurs*, eds. Bettina Völter et al. (Wiesbaden: Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2005), 46–64.

were implemented in the 1930s and which shaped the childhood and youth of these Jews, and Nazi racism, which destroyed this society, leads the narrators to a more positive portrayal of the Soviet project than scholarship on Soviet nationality policies toward Jews in the 1930s would suggest. Existing scholarly analyses of those policies emphasize party purges and terror, the violence of collectivization, and antireligious campaigning, and they note antisemitic assaults in factories, farms, and schools.⁴ The relational construction of memory, that is, the reinterpretation of the past based on the comparison of distinct periods such as childhood, war, and postwar reconstruction, makes the effects of Soviet policy appear less drastic and harmful, a phenomenon that can only be understood if we pay attention to the lives of historical subjects as a whole. Looking for both the role of personal experience and visions that were influential for individuals at particular moments and the social and political framework of commemoration and remembering that shape representations of the past in oral histories helps explain how, for survivors of the Holocaust who remained in the Soviet Union after World War II, the Soviet project of creating an internationalist, secular, and solidary body politic remained meaningful and valuable.

My work draws on several bodies of first-person accounts: oral history interviews I conducted between 2001 and 2008 in St. Petersburg and Minsk with twenty-four Jewish survivors of the Nazi genocide; approximately one hundred video testimonies recorded and archived by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) Oral History Branch and the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation (VHF) in the mid to late 1990s; and a number of autobiographical writings, also produced since 1990, by several people interviewed for these different collections and others. All of these narrators and writers grew up in Soviet Belorussia (roughly the eastern parts of the current Republic of Belarus), survived the German occupation there, and stayed on to live in the Soviet Union after the end of World War II. A significant difference

⁴ Arkadi Zeltser, "Inter-War Ethnic Relations and Soviet Policy: The Case of Eastern Belorussia," *Yad Vashem Studies* XXXIV (2006): 87–124. For more general analyses that discuss the prevalence of antisemitism in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, see Zvi Gitelman, *Jewish Nationality and Soviet Politics: The Jewish Sections of the CPSU, 1917–1930* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972); Zvi Gitelman, *A Century of Ambivalence: The Jews of Russia and the Soviet Union, 1881 to the Present*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001); Benjamin Pinkus, *The Jews of the Soviet Union: The History of a National Minority* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). Elissa Bemporad, Anna Shternshis, and Leonid Smilovitskii discuss the role of the Soviet education system in the antireligious campaigns against the observance of the Sabbath or the celebration of Jewish holidays such as Passover or Yom Kippur, for instance, by requiring attendance at school events at the time of the traditional seder, offering free food at days of fasting, or staging mock trials against members of the *Komsomol* who participated in religious activity. Elissa Bemporad, "Red Star on the Jewish Street: The Reshaping of Jewish Life in Soviet Minsk, 1917–1939," Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University, 2006, esp. 169, retrieved May 26, 2010, from Dissertations and Theses: Full Text (Publication No. AAT 3235181), at <http://proquest.umi.com>; Anna Shternshis, "Passover in the Soviet Union, 1917–1941," *East European Jewish Affairs* 31, no. 1 (2001): 70f; Leonid Smilovitskii, "Sovetskaia Shkola na Idish," in *Evrei Belarusi: Iz Nashei Obshchei Istorii, 1905–1953* (Minsk: Arti-Feks, 1999), esp. 47f.

between the USHMM and VHF video testimonies and my own interviews is the length and focus of the interviews. Whereas the testimony projects yielded highly structured interviews, concerned primarily with the narrators' wartime experiences, I strove to address their entire life stories. I initially encouraged interlocutors to freely narrate their life stories, before I posed more detailed questions about experiences the women and men had evoked themselves. My method included repeated encounters stretching over several years, which allowed me to research significant aspects of the oral history narratives and develop close relationships with the narrators. The USHMM and VHF testimonial sources were useful for providing details that confirmed the overall analytical framework developed from my interviews, in which the wartime experience of Nazi racism and antisemitism sharply contrasted with the interviewees' prewar lives and thus helped them to conceive of Soviet society as a valuable space that they were unwilling to leave behind by emigrating to another country.

These oral histories and video testimonies provide important insights into the German campaigns to destroy Soviet Jewry. With few exceptions, they are the only source that helps us understand how Jews responded to the Nazi violence in the German-occupied Soviet territories.⁵ Whereas in some of the ghettos in Poland or western Belorussia inmates created archives during the period of Nazi occupation that now serve as the basis for studies of the Holocaust, no such material has been found for the ghettos in eastern Belorussia. Therefore, these first-person accounts are unique and important sources that allow us to understand how young Soviet Jews experienced the Nazi occupation and genocide in Belorussia. The accounts cited here, moreover, illuminate the situation of adolescents in the Nazi-occupied Soviet territories. There is scant scholarship addressing the concrete material and emotional challenges experienced by young Soviet citizens; existing works on the situation of adolescents during the Nazi regime largely omit the Soviet Union and focus on Western and Central Europe, Germany, and Poland.⁶

⁵ See Yehuda Bauer, *The Death of the Shtetl* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 10–12.

⁶ Deborah Dwork's *Children with a Star: Jewish Youth in Nazi Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991) was the first and, so far, only monograph specifically addressing the lives of Jewish children in Nazi ghettos. Recent works on the fate of children during the Nazi regime or World War II either completely omit the experience of Soviet children, or the situation in the ghettos for Jewish residents is conspicuously absent even if there is a portrayal of Soviet children's experiences. See, for instance, Lynn H. Nicholas's study *Cruel World: The Children of Europe in the Nazi Web* (New York: Knopf, 2005), esp. chap. 11. Others provide limited descriptions, focusing on executions and a cursory account of Jewish youth in partisan units, as in Nicholas Stargardt, *Witnesses of War: Children's Lives under the Nazis* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 149–52. Patricia Heberer's edition of contemporaneous documents reflecting children's perceptions of the Holocaust includes few sources to address the German-occupied Soviet Union; an analysis of these documents is still to be done; Patricia Heberer, *Children during the Holocaust* (New York: AltaMira, 2012). Leonid Smilovitskii and Bernard Chiari devote chapters of their works on German-occupied Belorussia to the fate of children and are thus notable exceptions; see Bernard Chiari, *Alltag hinter der Front: Besatzung, Kollaboration und Widerstand in Weißrussland* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1998), chap. VI; Leonid Smilovitskii, *Katastrofa Evreev v Belorussii, 1941–1944gg* (Tel Aviv: Biblioteka Matveia Chernogo, 2000), chap. 3.

Alongside their role in explaining Soviet Jews' responses to the Nazi genocide, the oral histories of elderly Jews in the former Soviet Union also provide crucial insights into the effects of Soviet policy on nationalities. They help expand scholarship that gives a complex portrayal of how Soviet nationality policies reshaped Jewish life in the USSR.⁷ In the Soviet Union, "nationality" was an institutionalized cultural and political form and a legal category that determined individual and collective rights of access to social, political, and economic participation. Nationality in this context roughly equates with notions of ethnicity and race familiar from the North American context and describes a group of people identified (by themselves or others) by a common heritage, common language, and shared cultural practices; that is, a racialized concept of descent and belonging is part of group identity and formation.⁸ Jews in the Soviet Union were thus Jewish by nationality because of their family relationships, and this identification was codified through a passport entry listing the holder's *natsional'nost'* (Russian: nationality).⁹ Culturally, however, many Jews—and as I show below, especially younger ones—did not perceive themselves as Jews. They did not practice inherited traditions nor speak the Yiddish language, which, beginning in the 1920s, was determined to be the official national language of Soviet Jews. While Yiddish was initially promoted through state support for publishing and theater performances, it was increasingly suppressed in favor of other languages such as Russian, Belorussian, or Ukrainian in the 1930s. For people of Samuil Volk's age, the political framework of internationalism and patriotism set the parameters of their self-understanding. They experienced and valued the propagated modes of interethnic solidarity and respect and the formation of a Soviet civic identity that transgressed national particularity, experiences that drastically differed from the experiences of their grandparents and even parents who had lived under the limitations to residence and economic and political rights in the Tsarist Empire. Their sense of patriotism for the Soviet state was, therefore, a feeling of loyalty and a willingness to actively defend it, even with military means, rooted in their hope for a better future.

⁷ Elissa Bemporad, "Behavior Unbecoming a Communist: Jewish Religious Practice in Soviet Minsk," *Jewish Social Studies* 14, no. 2 (2008): 1–31; Anna Shternshis, *Soviet and Kosher: Jewish Popular Culture in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

⁸ Concise analyses of Soviet nationality policies and the institutionalization of ethnic heterogeneity are in Rogers Brubaker, "Nationhood and the National Question in the Soviet Union and Post-Soviet Eurasia: An Institutional Account," *Theory and Society* 23, no. 1 (1994): 47–48; Yuri Slezkine, "The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism," *Slavic Review* 53, no. 2 (1994): 414–52.

⁹ A modified Library of Congress transliteration system is used throughout the text when Russian terms are used or explained. The Russian endings *ий* and *ый* appear as *ii* and *yi*; except for the Russian soft (') and hard (") signs, all diacritics are omitted. Names and toponyms are given in their non-Anglicized form. Exceptions are made in the case of famous personalities, when authors chose different transliterations in their own publications, or when archives such as VHF or USHMM transliterate names of interviewees differently.

Preconditions: Soviet Society on the Eve of the German Invasion

As part of the war against the Soviet Union, German troops attacked the former Pale of Settlement in June 1941. The Pale, an area encompassing present-day Lithuania, Poland, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, and western parts of Russia, had housed hundreds of thousands of Jews and their communal and religious institutions, after Tsarina Catherine II restricted Jewish residence within the Russian Empire. The Pale was thus the center of Eastern European Jewry. When limitations on residence and movement within the Tsarist Empire were lifted with the Russian Revolution in 1917, a substantial number of, primarily young, Jewish residents subsequently moved to cities and towns outside of the Pale to pursue educational careers or find employment. Nonetheless, Jews continued to form large parts of the population in Belorussia, as elsewhere in the region.¹⁰ The invading German forces occupied not only an area with a high concentration of Jews, but also a society that was in a process of social, political, and cultural transformation following the establishment of Soviet power. The Sovietization and secularization campaigns of the 1920s and 1930s, which were part of building a society in accordance with Marxist ideology, impacted Jewish life in Belorussia significantly, as many Jews turned away from religious practices and enthusiastically embraced Soviet educational and social policies.

As a result of these changes, narrators largely agree that, apart from the official identification fixed in the passport entry stating the Jewish nationality of its bearer, “being Jewish” had little relevance for everyday interactions before the war. Relationships among members of different national groups appeared unproblematic and international (interethnic) friendships were normal, albeit more extensive in urban centers, such as Minsk and Bobruisk, than in rural areas.¹¹ Cultural practices rooted in specific national traditions merely aroused curiosity and engendered communication, as indicated by Vera Smirnova’s fond memory of Russian neighbors in Minsk asking her mother for recipes for

¹⁰ See Gitelman, *Century of Ambivalence*, 84f, 108–11. Arkady Zeltser argues that especially those aged twenty-four to forty-nine in 1935 left the shtetls, seeking employment in larger cities of Belorussia or the Soviet Union more generally; see Arkady Zeltser, “The Belorussian Shtetl in the 1920s and 1930s,” in *Revolution, Repression, and Revival*, eds. Zvi Gitelman and Yaacov Ro’i (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), 93, 95.

¹¹ Among others, Elena Drapkina, interviewed by author, St. Petersburg, April 26, 2001 and September 10, 2002, interviews in author’s possession; Grigorii Erenburg, interviewed by author, St. Petersburg, April 25, 2001, interview in author’s possession; Rita Kazhdan, interviewed by author, St. Petersburg, May 24, 2001, interview in author’s possession; Roza Zelenko, interviewed by author, Minsk, October 11, 2002, interview in author’s possession; USHMM, Record Group 50.120, Oral History, Israel Documentation Project, Interview with Leonid Okon (Okun), July 2, 1993, RG-50.120*0116; USHMM, Record Group 50.378, Oral History, Belarus Documentation Project, interview with Vera Vladimirovna Smirnova, Minsk, August 8, 1995, RG-50.378*025.

Jewish dishes such as *gefilte fish*.¹² Jewish cultural heritage emerges from these accounts as tied to older generations who continued to engage in prayer, religious study, or observed *kashrut*, the Jewish dietary laws, in private and largely without the backing of communal institutions. Boris Gal'perin, who grew up in a *kolkhoz* (Russian: acronym for *kollektivnoe khoziaistvo*, collective farm) in Shklov, explained:

My grandfather lived with us. He was very religious, and my mother prepared everything separately for him, we had an extra set of dishes for him. He prayed every morning; he had his own bench in the synagogue. . . . He wanted to teach me Hebrew, but at the time that was not welcomed in the schools, and so I always ran away, I did not want to know. I really regret that I don't know it.¹³

Boris's grandfather clearly tried to pass along his cultural and religious knowledge to the grandson. He failed because of the young boy's lack of interest. This disinterest might have expressed the mood of a boy who wanted to play, rather than study religion, yet it was also rooted in the young one's knowledge that religious practice was not socially accepted behavior, as it contradicted the drive to secularize Soviet society. Interestingly, the one photograph of himself that Gal'perin gave to me "to remember him" shows him as a Young Pioneer, a member of the Communist Party's Youth Organization for children aged ten to fifteen.¹⁴ Had my interlocutor disavowed his childhood experiences of Soviet schooling and secularization completely, such a gift would have been unlikely. Instead, the image indicates that the seventy-two-year-old man continued to remember this time as important and valuable. Gifting it to me, he also encouraged me, the researcher, to recognize this as an important experience to be included in accounting for his life.

Similar statements on the increasing distance of narrators from religious Judaism abound. Nearly all of the interviewees report that they were not educated in religious traditions or the Hebrew language, often highlighting that their parents did not encourage them to learn about their cultural or national origins. Rather, a number of narrators emphasized their parents' push to speak Belorussian or Russian, rather than Yiddish. Rita Kazhdan, for instance, stated, "We never spoke Yiddish at home. I learned Russian in school so that I would not have an accent."¹⁵ Kazhdan's account suggests that the attempt at cultural and

¹² Smirnova, Vera, Interview 30334, Minsk, April 12, 1997, *Visual History Archive*, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, accessed online at the USHMM on May 18, 2010.

¹³ Boris Gal'perin, interviewed by author, St. Petersburg, May 16, 2001, interview in author's possession.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Kazhdan, Rita, Interview 654, Krakow, January 25, 1995, *Visual History Archive*, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, accessed online at the USHMM on January 15, 2010.

linguistic assimilation served a larger purpose. Her parents hoped their daughter would not have an accent, a wish rooted in the goal to secure her social mobility and professional opportunities in the new Soviet society. Young Rita's parents' efforts included keeping the girl oblivious to national categorization, as she herself explained:

I remember, in third grade, the teacher asked which nationality we were; she had to fill out some lists. And when she called out my name, Fridman, Rita, my maiden name, I said, "I don't know, I'll ask my mother." There were no divisions between us. After all, these were Soviet times, I grew up in the Soviet state.¹⁶

Many Jewish-born youth like Rita did not develop a strong sense for their Jewish identity in the 1930s.

In these accounts, the ideal of Soviet internationalism, where difference merged into equality, had become reality in the children and youths' everyday lives. In addition to schools, teenagers experienced this sense of unity in *kruzhki* (Russian: workshops), sports clubs, Pioneer summer camps, and elsewhere. Many of these catered to the youths' personal interests, but they were also spaces of political instruction and were designed to facilitate societal cohesion. The Pioneer's Palaces, youth centers where Young Pioneers engaged in extracurricular activities such as sport, arts, and crafts, and which were often housed in former residences of the Tsar or Russian nobility, emerge in several accounts as a center of after-school activity. In the Minsk Pioneer's Palace, Vera Smirnova attended dance classes; Elena Drapkina followed her love of literature and participated in theater workshops; Vladimir Mordkhilevich trained to become a singer; and Mikhail Treister practiced gymnastics three times a week.¹⁷ Both Mordkhilevich and Drapkina recount their participation in theater performances, including *How the Steel Was Tempered* (by Nikolai Ostrovskii), *Timur and His Team* (by Arkadi Gaidar), and *The Snow Queen and Emperor's New Clothes* (both by Hans Christian Andersen).

Alongside strong moral messages about the struggle between good and evil (which, in the spirit of the time, was resolved by siding with the common people and searching for the common good), the element of heroism on behalf of the socialist cause, especially in *Timur and His Team* and *How the Steel Was Tempered*, further strengthened the youths' consciousness of being Soviet

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Vera Vladimirovna Smirnova, Minsk, August 8, 1995, USHMM, RG-50.378*025; Drapkina, Elena, Interview 2325, St. Petersburg, April 19, 1995, *Visual History Archive*, USC Shoah Foundation Institute; Elena Drapkina, interviewed by author, St. Petersburg, May 18, 2005, interview in author's possession; Vladimir Mordkhilevich, June 8, 1995, USHMM, RG-50.120*209; Treister, Mikhail, Interview 2324, St. Petersburg, April 23, 1995, *Visual History Archive*, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, accessed online at the USHMM on June 25, 2010.

citizens. Young Grigorii Erenburg, for instance, was an avid reader and spent much time in his local library. Ostrovskii's *How the Steel Was Tempered* was his favorite book, and Erenburg invoked the book multiple times during his interview to explain his enthusiasm for participating in the exciting endeavor of building a new society. He repeatedly stressed that even in 2001 he considered *How the Steel Was Tempered* to be a very important book: "This is a very patriotic and heroic book. As a young man, the writer participated in the Russian Civil War and was seriously wounded. He [the main character] was my role model. I was so impressed by him. I was very romantic."¹⁸

The absence of critical statements about the promotion of such ideals and the excitement and normalcy with which these activities were recalled suggest that many, if not most, of the young Jews welcomed the opportunity to participate in activities guided and approved by the new Soviet regime. The youths' integration into the purview of Soviet education, the party, and youth organizations, as well as their multiethnic personal relationships, marks the success of Soviet secularization and nationality policies.

The Nazi Invasion and Genocide: Identification, Separation, Isolation

The German onslaught against the Soviet Jewish population, beginning in 1941, targeted a population that was vulnerable to persecution, because it was still concentrated spatially, as primarily younger Jews had moved away from the former Pale to receive higher education, while the majority of the Jews of the Pale had stayed put. The troops also confronted Jewish communities whose younger members, especially in urban centers, such as Minsk, did not need or want to perceive of themselves as distinct from their peers of other nationalities until they were forced to do so by Nazi racism and terror. Moreover, young Soviet Jews were, prior to the invasion, largely oblivious to the threat and danger posed by Nazi Germany, in particular to the genocidal plans against European Jewry.

¹⁸ Grigorii Erenburg, interviewed by author, St. Petersburg, April 25, 2001, interview in author's possession. *How the Steel Was Tempered* is a fictionalized autobiography of the author who fought in the ranks of the Bolsheviks during the Civil War, 1917–22. Despite physical injury, hero Pavel Korchagin uses all his energies to advance the communist cause. His principles are described thusly: "Man's dearest possession is life, and it is given to him to live but once. He must live so as to feel no torturing regrets for years without purpose, never know the burning shame of a mean and petty past; so live that, dying, he can say: All my life, all my strength were given to the finest cause in all the world—the fight for the Liberation of Mankind. And one must make use of every moment of life, lest some sudden illness or tragic accident cut it short." (Nikolai Ostrovski, *How the Steel Was Tempered*, trans. R. Prokofieva [Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1952 (1934)], 73). The book was widely distributed not only in the Soviet Union but was compulsory reading for students in East Germany and many other Eastern European countries as well. Full of adventures of a rebellious student, it was even more useful to promote the young generation's potential and obligation to help further the socialist revolution.

Soviet leaders had acknowledged the probability of war, yet, according to the oral history accounts, this threat was downplayed until the very day of the attack, and prewar propaganda and perception revolved around the invincibility of the Soviet regime.¹⁹ Elena Drapkina, who was active in the ranks of the Minsk BGTO (Bud' Gotov' k Trudu i Oborone SSSR—Be Ready for Labor and Defense of the USSR!), a paramilitary training organization to include civilians in the defense of the state in case of war, spoke for many in saying, “We were absolutely convinced that war would never reach us. There was this song, ‘If war comes tomorrow,’ it said, that we ‘will defeat the enemy on his own land,’ but not on our territory.”²⁰ Perhaps because we were Pioneers and *Komsomol'tsy* (members of the Communist Party's children and youth organizations) we were so sure.”²¹

Consequently, when German troops were advancing with full speed deep into Soviet territories and the Soviet radio station played war songs while declaring that Soviet troops were defending the border, this only supported people's optimism and seemingly fulfilled the promise that had seeped into the population's consciousness over the past several years. “If war comes tomorrow, we will defeat the enemy on his own land,” as it was described by Elena Drapkina and others.²² As a result, Amalia Iakhontova recalled that her mother, Anna Borisovna Pekhman-Khurgina, was sure that “the Soviet troops would win the war the next day.”²³ Mikhail Treister was even upset that the war would end “without my participation . . . after all, our troops are already in Warsaw, or even Berlin.”²⁴ Narrators remembered that refugees from Poland, many of them Jewish, had reported Nazi brutality, and they knew they would be in danger once German troops seized Soviet territory. But all of them asserted that, based

¹⁹ See Peter Kenez, *A History of the Soviet Union from the Beginning to the End* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 2006), 138; Joshua Rubenstein, “The War and the Final Solution on the Russian Front,” in *The Unknown Black Book*, eds. Joshua Rubenstein and Ilya Altman (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008), 6; Yitzhak Arad, *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 65.

²⁰ Elena Drapkina refers here to the song *Esli zavtra voina* composed by D. Pokrass and V. Lebedev-Kumach in 1938. The song featured prominently in the film with the same title, *Esli Zavtra Voina (If War Comes Tomorrow)*, Dir. Efim Dzigal et al. (USSR: MosFilm, 1938).

²¹ Drapkina, Elena, Interview 2325, St. Petersburg, April 19, 1995, *Visual History Archive*, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, accessed online at the USHMM on January 22, 2010. Similarly, Rita Kazhdan, interviewed by author, St. Petersburg, May 24, 2001, interview in author's possession. *Komsomol* is the acronym for *Kommunisticheskii Soiuz Molodiozhy* (Communist Union of Youth), the official youth organization of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, established in 1918. *Komsomolets* (sing.) and *Komsomol'tsy* (pl.) are the members of this organization.

²² Aisenshtadt, Pesia, Interview 29732, Minsk, February 17, 1994, *Visual History Archive*, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, accessed online at the USHMM on July 12, 2010; David Taubkin, “Moi Gorod, Znakomyi do Slez,” in *Katastrofa: Poslednie Svideteli*, ed. Z. Tsukerman (Moskva: Dom Evreiskoi Knigi, 2008), 256.

²³ Iakhontova (Khurgina), Amalia Moiseevna, Interview 43211, Novosibirsk, April 16, 1998, *Visual History Archive*, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, accessed online at the USHMM on July 20, 2010.

²⁴ Mikhail Treister, “Probleiski Pamiati,” in *Katastrofa: Poslednie Svideteli* ed. Tsukerman 303.

on what they had been told for several years, they did not expect an invasion, much less that it would happen so fast and result in such a crushing defeat.²⁵ The failure of the Soviet government, and Stalin in particular, to take seriously warnings of an impending German attack on the Soviet Union and to inform Soviet citizens about Nazi anti-Jewish policies put them in extreme danger for which they were unprepared.

The Nazi invasion also hit a population that looked in vain to local and state leaders once the occupying forces made their way into the country. In Minsk, for instance, city administrators and party functionaries left the city on June 25, barely having ordered the evacuation of some factories, yet failing to ensure any safety measures for the population.²⁶ The air raids, which began on June 23, targeted Belorussian cities at the beginning of the summer break, a time when many youth were looking forward to several weeks of leisure or new experiences. Some, like twelve-year-old Leonid Okon and sixteen-year-old Yakov Negnevitzki, went to celebrate the completion of the recreational site *Komsomol'skoe Ozero* (Komsomol Lake) in Minsk on June 22, 1941, a large-scale construction project that had involved Pioneers' and *Komsomol* volunteers' labor.²⁷ Ekaterina Tsirlina, eighteen years old, was looking forward to joining friends at the opening. She did not manage to leave her home: "At noon Molotov [Viacheslav Molotov, Soviet Foreign Minister] gave a radio address and announced that the war had begun. Our guys came and said that they couldn't come with us; they had been summoned to the *Voenkomat* (Russian: *Voennyi Komissariat*, Draft Office) for the next day. So we all sat there, talked, and cried."²⁸ Similarly surprised was Elena Drapkina, who was attending a guest performance of MKhAT, the Moscow Art Theater, in Minsk Pioneer's Palace. Pesia Aisenshtadt, who was preparing for her final

²⁵ USHMM, Record Group 50.378, Oral History, Belarus Documentation Project, Interview with Yakov Negnevitzki, Minsk, August 7, 1995, RG-50.378*0022; Iakhontova, Amalia, Interview 43211, Novosibirsk, April 16, 1998, *Visual History Archive*, USC Shoah Foundation Institute; Treister, Mikhail, Interview 2324, St. Petersburg, April 23, 1995, *Visual History Archive*, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, accessed online at the USHMM on June 25, 2010.

²⁶ See Hersh Smolar, *The Minsk Ghetto: Soviet Jewish Partisans against the Nazis* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1989), 17; Inna Gerasimova, "Evrei v Partizanskom Dvizenii Belorussii, 1941–1944: Obshchaia Kharakteristika," in *Uroki Kholokosta*, ed. Iakov Z. Basin (Minsk: Kovcheg, 2004), 138; Barbara Epstein, *The Minsk Ghetto, 1941–1943: Jewish Resistance and Soviet Internationalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 77; Rebecca Manley, *To the Tashkent Station: Evacuation and Survival in the Soviet Union at War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 48.

²⁷ *Minsk: Staryi-Novyi*, "Komsomol'skoe Ozero," accessed May 25, 2013, <http://minsk-old-new.com/minsk-2858-ru.htm>.

²⁸ Tsirlina, Ekaterina, Interview 28012, Minsk, January 2, 1997, *Visual History Archive*, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, accessed online at the USHMM on July 13, 2010. The draft largely failed, as German troops had advanced toward Minsk and occupied the city faster than the Soviet military was able to prepare and equip the recruits; see Enta Maizles, "Minsk. Fashistskaia Okkupatsia. Genotsid," in *Uroki Kholokosta: Istorია I Sovremennost*, ed. Iakov Basin (Minsk: Kovcheg, 2009), 177.

exam and, thinking it was just an air raid drill, turned off the radio when it blared a siren.²⁹ Sonia Zalesskaia, Samuil Volk, and many other children had just arrived at summer camps outside the city, eager to spend time away from home.³⁰ Many of them had trouble reuniting with their parents, and several hundred children faced the destruction by themselves, having to make sense of it on their own.

The larger goals of the occupation, especially the destruction of the Jewish communities, were not obvious during the first few days of the war. The description of one woman, Elena Drapkina, demonstrates the initial impressions and reactions of many Soviet people, non-Jews and Jews alike. Trained as a member of the BGTO, the paramilitary organization that had attracted men and women in the prewar USSR, young Elena considered herself ready to participate in military efforts to drive out the Germans. She described her thoughts at the sight of marching German soldiers who entered Minsk on June 28:

When the war began, I saw the German troops marching, they were all very young, beautiful and healthy, and they had all this equipment. I stood there and thought: My God, I really want to live to the moment when I see at least one German soldier in captivity. I wonder what they will look like then. . . . We were patriots.³¹

In that moment, the German invasion appeared like an attack on the Soviet Union and its population as a whole, calling forth the patriotic sentiments of many. The German army appeared as a force to be defeated, and young Elena looked forward to actively contributing to its defeat. But German troops had penetrated Soviet territory deeply by then, and more was at stake than only the conquest of territory. Rather, Elena's very life was threatened, and that of her family, friends, and colleagues—indeed, of thousands of Soviet citizens who were destined to be killed.

That something more severe than a war-related occupation lay ahead of the youth was revealed when antisemitism became palpable and shaped everyday social relations. Rita Kazhdan's narration of her family's attempt to evacuate from Minsk is emblematic of these experiences. Rita's family left Minsk for the

²⁹ Aisenshtadt, Pesia, Interview 29732, Minsk, February 17, 1994, *Visual History Archive*, USC Shoah Foundation Institute.

³⁰ Volk, Samuil, Interview 43231, Novosibirsk, April 15, 1997, *Visual History Archive*, USC Shoah Foundation Institute; Zalesskaia, Sonia, Interview 30810, Minsk, May 4, 1997, *Visual History Archive*, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, accessed online at the USHMM on July 13, 2010. See also Leonid Smilovitskii, *Katastrofa Evreev v Belorussii*, 68; "They Were Dealing in Children," *The Unknown Black Book*, eds. Joshua Rubenstein and Ilya Altman (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008), 248; "Minsk Hell: The Recollections of the Teacher Sofia Ozerskaya," *The Unknown Black Book*, 250.

³¹ Elena Drapkina, interviewed by author, St. Petersburg, April 26, 2001, interview in author's possession.

village where they had spent the past twelve summers. Three days into the family's time in the village, Rita remembered:

people began to complain to us that, "because of you Jews the Germans will burn the whole village." They knew we were Jewish, because we had come there for the past twelve years. It was impossible to listen to this, more so since [before the war] we had no idea what antisemitism was. Well, but when these arguments came up, mother and father immediately decided to go back to the city. We had no place to stay, our house was destroyed, . . . and so we moved into our neighbors' apartment. After the mass flight from the city many homes were empty.³²

Her narration reveals the emergence and public articulation of anti-Jewish sentiments by Soviet citizens and their role in the family's entrapment in the city. Like Rita Kazhdan, others, including Pesia Aisenshtadt, Elena Drapkina, and Mikhail Treister, returned to Minsk, seeking shelter with relatives, in abandoned houses, or in public buildings that housed stranded refugees. Still others had never left, staying with relatives who were unable to move or who remained in the city because family members remembered German soldiers who had occupied Minsk during World War I and were sure they would not do particular harm to Jews.³³

Ultimately, this assumption proved false. Yet, the accounts of Rita Kazhdan and others indicate that, even before the German occupation regime had actively disseminated antisemitic propaganda and implemented anti-Jewish policies, some Soviet citizens felt compelled to distance themselves from their Jewish compatriots and even deny them assistance because they were Jews.³⁴ These mostly verbal acts of hostility were a far cry from the pogroms against Jews that were committed by locals, either before German troops even entered the place (as in Lithuania, Latvia, and the Ukraine) or where the occupying forces left the decision on the treatment of Jews to local gentiles (as in Jedwabne, Poland).³⁵

³² Rita Kazhdan, interviewed by author, St. Petersburg, May 24, 2001, interview in author's possession.

³³ Tsirlina, Ekaterina, Interview 28012, Minsk, January 2, 1997, *Visual History Archive*, USC Shoah Foundation Institute; USHMM, Record Group 02.174, "Reminiscences of Albert Lapidus, from Baltimore, a former prisoner of the Minsk ghetto," 4. These reminiscences were published, as the first two of a four-part publication, as "Nas Malo Ostalos', Nam Mnogo Dostalos'," *Vestnik*, no. 2(313)–3(314) (2003), accessed May 25, 2013, <http://www.vestnik.com/win/arch03.htm>; USHMM, Record Group 50.120, Oral History, Israel Documentation Project, Interview with Vladimir Mordkhilevich, June 8, 1995, RG-50.120*209.

³⁴ Yakov Negnevitzki, August 7, 1997, USHMM, RG-50.378*022; Aisenshtadt, Pesia, Interview 29732, Minsk, February 17, 1994, *Visual History Archive*, USC Shoah Foundation Institute.

³⁵ Arad, *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union*, 88f; Aristotle Killis, "'Licence' and Genocide in the East: Reflections on Localised Eliminationist Violence During the First Stages of 'Operation Barbarossa,'" *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 7, no. 3 (2007): 6–23; specifically on Riga, where 2500 Jews were killed, see Andrej Angrick and Peter Klein, *The 'Final Solution' in Riga: Exploitation and Annihilation, 1941–1944* (New York: Berghahn 2009), 60; on Jedwabne, see Jan T. Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

Still, these open hostilities reveal that the idea of Soviet internationalism had to some extent failed to create social cohesion among the Soviet population. Instead, the Soviet collective was susceptible to antisemitism and racist ideology.³⁶ What is more, these hostilities proved especially unsettling to youth, such as Rita, who had been raised to believe that century-old prejudices were invalidated and, indeed, subject to legal prosecution.³⁷

The occupation regime's violence, building as it did on previous anti-Jewish sentiment, exacerbated a sense of confusion, as Mikhail Treister, writing in the early 2000s, remembered. The sarcasm that is evident in his writing is indicative of the trepidation he experienced, and it helps us grasp the personal implications of racialization:

Zhid (Russian: Kike). I knew before the war that there was a word like that. One received 15 years [in prison] for it. One had to be a really enthusiastic antisemite to pay that much for the modest enchantment of calling someone a *zhid*. The liquidation of orthodox and catholic churches and synagogues had relegated the nationality question into the realm of some virtual platitudes. I was not a Jew. And I wasn't a Russian either. I was nobody. And all of a sudden there were posters at each gate and at every ruin with the decree of the *Feldkommandant* (German: Field Commander), dated July 19, 1941, about the establishment of the ghetto.³⁸

Whereas children and youth had been officially told that their national identity did not matter, the Nazi occupation regime introduced a racial hierarchy that first and foremost distinguished between Jews and non-Jews and assigned this hierarchy explicit meaning in terms of how people were treated.

³⁶ See also Bernhard Chiari, *Alltag hinter der Front: Besatzung, Kollaboration und Widerstand in Weißrussland, 1941–1944* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1998), chap. 7. The related issue of Belorussian residents' active collaboration with German occupation regime, including helping identify Jews to be persecuted, suggests the presence of anti-Jewish hatred. In light of the Soviet nationality policies, a study of regional differences, especially between the formerly Polish territories and Soviet Belorussia (pre-1939), would be desirable to make broader claims about the extent of these attitudes. Existing scholarship remains vague on this question; see, for instance, Martin Dean, *Collaboration in the Holocaust: Crimes of the Local Police in Belorussia and Ukraine, 1941–44* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000); Leonid Rein, *The Kings and the Pawns: Collaboration in Byelorussia during World War II* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011).

³⁷ See Joseph Stalin, "Reply to an Inquiry of the Jewish News Agency in the United States," *Collected Works*, vol. 13, July 1930–January 1934 (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1954), 30, where Stalin confirmed that antisemitism is punished by Soviet law as part of the struggle against nationalism and chauvinism.

³⁸ Treister, "Probleski Pamiati," 305. The order to all Jews of Minsk to move into a Jewish quarter was issued on July 19, 1941, demanding that the move be completed by July 24 (Arad, *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union*, 152).

Ghettos like the one Mikhail Treister referred to were, in most cases, essentially holding pens in preparation for the genocide.³⁹ As a form of spatial segregation, ghettoization first of all inhibited free access to food and other necessities, thus fulfilling a central goal of the German occupation regime: forcing starvation upon the Jewish population so as to destroy it.⁴⁰ German policies included the denial of food rations to Jews who did not work, and these policies were exacerbated by the legacy of Soviet policies of social and economic equalization, along with the antireligious campaigns, of the 1920s and 1930s. After campaigns to collect valuables from Soviet citizens and standardize salaries in the 1930s, ghetto inmates had hardly anything to barter with for food, and the prewar destruction of faith-based communal institutions obstructed the establishment of collective self-help during the war.⁴¹

Ghettos became spaces of persecution but also forced communality. Young, secular Pioneers and older generations practicing religious Judaism lived side by side, an intensive encounter that stood in sharp contrast to prewar segregation where, for instance, Boris Gal'perin actively evaded his grandfather's invitation to join him for religious study. Several narrators expressed their shock at being treated as somebody who, in their opinion, they were not. Vladimir Mordkhilevich, for instance, indicated that an urge to preserve or revive traditional Jewish values and worldviews re-emerged during wartime, especially among older generations. Presumably in search of spiritual comfort and social cohesion among the fragmented Soviet Jewish community, these older men and women gathered in prayer circles or attempted to pass on important stories or symbols, such as the Hebrew language, to younger Jews. To Vladimir, these efforts were inconceivable:

Around Rosh Hashanah my grandmother took me to a Hebrew teacher; she was very religious and wanted to make sure I learned the language. I thought that was ridiculous, I always wanted to run away. I did not like it; the prayers appeared mystical and inaccessible to me, scary even.⁴²

³⁹ Wendy Lower, "Facilitating Genocide: Nazi Ghettoization Practices in Occupied Ukraine, 1941–1942," in *Life in the Ghettos during the Holocaust*, ed. Eric J. Sterling (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2005), 127. On the specificities of ghettos in Belorussia, including their short existence and function as sites for preparing genocide, see Al'bert Kaganovich, "Voprosy i Zadachi Issledovania Mest Prinuditel'nogo Soderzhania Evreev na Territorii Belarusi v 1941–1944gg.," *Aktual'nye Voprosy Izucheniia Kholokosta na Territorii Belarusi v Gody Nemetsko-fashistskoi Okkupatsii: Sbornik Nauchnykh Rabot*, ed. Ia. Z. Basin (Minsk: Kovcheg, 2005), accessed May 25, 2013, <http://www.homoliber.org/ru/kg/kg020108.html>; Martin Dean, "Life and Death in the 'Gray Zone' of Jewish Ghettos in Nazi-Occupied Europe: The Unknown, the Ambiguous, and the Disappeared," in *Gray Zones: Ambiguity and Compromise in the Holocaust and Its Aftermath*, eds. Jonathan Petropoulos and John K. Roth (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005), 209.

⁴⁰ Christian Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde: Die deutsche Wirtschafts- und Vernichtungspolitik in Weißrußland 1941–1944* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1999), 668ff.

⁴¹ Smolar, *The Minsk Ghetto*, 166.

⁴² Vladimir Mordkhilevich, June 8, 1995, USHMM, RG-50.120*209.

Vladimir's unease with Jewish religion and tradition was rooted in his childhood removed from this culture. Before the war, his grandfather had gone to the synagogue regularly, but young Vladimir never joined him.⁴³ His grandmother's attempt thus asked him to attend to religion in a way he had not before the war and requested inclusion into a collective, that of religious Jews, he had not perceived meaningful for himself personally.

Beginning in late June and into July 1941, German troops began to execute members of the party and the professional elite of Soviet society, primarily male Jews and some women who occupied high positions in state or part administrations. Then, beginning in August, the murder was extended to include male and female Jewish civilians, as well as children.⁴⁴ Thus, early on a number of children and youth were deprived of their closest relatives. Frida Ped'ko, for instance, lost her mother shortly after her hometown was occupied. Ped'ko revealed that her mother, since she was party secretary, had been "among the first to be shot"; "they made them dig their own grave, near the river, and there they shot her."⁴⁵ As in Frida's mother's case, the German occupation regime targeted those who had achieved integration and high social status in Soviet society as its first victims. By singling out Jews for destruction, these killings signaled the undoing of the integration of previously marginalized minorities into Soviet society.

In the ghettos, ad hoc solutions and mutual assistance among the Jewish inhabitants were crucial for obtaining food and heating material, as well as to care for the ill and elderly. In Minsk, ghetto inmates were also able to depend on some non-Jews (prewar friends, classmates, teachers, and colleagues) who provided additional food, shelter during pogroms, hiding places, and escape routes from the ghetto.⁴⁶

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde*, 557.

⁴⁵ Frida Ped'ko, interviewed by author, St. Petersburg, May 13, 2005, interview in author's possession. Menukha Boroda, a Jewish woman who escaped the destruction of Slavnoe's Jewish community, reports an incident in the summer 1941 in which she and seventeen other Jews "mostly from the Sel'sovet, Russian and Jews, Communists, were lined up" and shot. Boroda was released after a neighbor told the Germans in charge that she was not a Jew. This arrest and execution may have involved Ped'ko's mother, who was both a member of the Communist Party and occupied a post in the Sel'sovet; interview of an eyewitness of the Holocaust, Menukha Boroda, with Dr. Irina P. Gerasimova, director of the Museum for the History and Culture of Belorussian Jews (no date; video in Russian), for *Moe Mestechko – My Shtetl*, accessed May 25, 2013, <http://shtetle.co.il/Shtetls/slavnoe/boroda.html>.

⁴⁶ Rita Kazhdan, interviewed by author, St. Petersburg, May 24, 2001, interview in author's possession; Mikhail Treister, interviewed by author and Eva Determann, Minsk, March 19, 2003, interview in author's possession; Volk, Samuil, Interview 43231, Novosibirsk, April 15, 1997, *Visual History Archive*, USC Shoah Foundation Institute; Roza Zelenko, interviewed by author, Minsk, October 11, 2002, interview in author's possession; Taubkin, "Moi Gorod, Znakomy do Slez." Detailed accounts of the underground and rescue networks in the Minsk ghetto are in Reuben Ainsztein, "Minsk: 'The Ghetto Means Death'," in *Jewish Resistance in Nazi-Occupied Eastern Europe (with a Historical Survey of the Jew as Fighter and Soldier in the Diaspora)* (London: Elek Books, 1974), 463–85; Smolar, *The Minsk Ghetto*.

Mikhail Treister noted the vital role individuals outside of the ghetto played and the danger this presented to them:

Whoever survived could do that only because somebody helped. There weren't that many people who did that . . . they deserve recognition. I had one woman who helped me, Iosefa Nikodimova, my former teacher. She often risked her life. I hid at her house when there was a pogrom in the ghetto, she could have been killed if neighbors would have reported on her. I knew the risk she took and used her place only in emergencies.⁴⁷

For those who lived, life became a daily experience of exhausting labor, unpredictable violence, and lack of food and other necessities. Mikhail Treister, for instance, found work as a shoemaker in Minsk, producing shoes for German soldiers. In addition to the humiliation of having to provide supplies to those who persecuted him, he also experienced a sense of alienation from other people that was unfamiliar to him. This alienation resulted from both the regular killing of thousands of Jewish inmates and the ghetto fence that restricted Jews' ability to buy or trade valuables for food:

While we were eating our so-called soup, the Russians brought bread, lard, pickles, and on the side they chewed on these unimaginable delicacies. We tried not to look at each other. They were also paid for their work. And we went home differently: they went to their families, we—in a column, toward our netherworld where most of us had already lost their family.⁴⁸

Mikhail Treister's recollection highlights the small yet crucial details that mark the emergence during the occupation of visible hierarchical relationships between people of different nationalities. Shattered was the prewar world of Soviet internationalism that was inherently fragile yet in substantial ways had shaped the youth's growing up in the prewar decade.

Survival: Soviet Partisans, the State, and Revived Collectivity

How did these shifts in the social and personal relationships affect how young Soviet Jews survived and understood occupation, forced labor, and pogroms? How did they survive the atrocities? The oral histories, which describe both individual and collective strategies to overcome deprivation and violence, suggest that the interethnic solidarity and patriotism that had been promoted before the

⁴⁷ Treister, Mikhail, Interview 2324, St. Petersburg, April 23, 1995, *Visual History Archive*, USC Shoah Foundation Institute.

⁴⁸ Treister, "Probleski Pamiati," 310.

war were instrumental to surviving Nazi violence. The shared experience of war and genocide revived bonds between Jews and non-Jews that had been established by the Soviet state's encouragement of multinational coexistence and which resulted in the creation of a new interethnic and patriotic communality. At the same time, Soviet society proved to be less resilient against Nazi propaganda than state policies and their success in the 1930s might have suggested would be the case. Individual Soviet citizens proved to still harbor anti-Jewish resentments. Furthermore, the official categorization of Soviet citizens based on their nationality posed problems for refugees from the ghettos who reached the presumably safe space of Soviet partisan groups.

The Soviet partisan movement, a movement of up to 380,000 Soviet citizens of many different nationalities who together formed combat and other units in the forests and swamps of Belorussia to resist the Nazi assault, was to become a crucial site for the effort to defeat the German campaign of annihilation. Initially, these units of guerilla fighters were groups of scattered Soviet soldiers and civilians, but between 1942 and 1943 they were brought under the control of the Soviet government. Subsequently, they posed a significant military threat to the Nazi occupation in the rear of the German-Soviet front-line. Nonetheless, internal conflicts within the partisan movement also pointed to unsolved tensions in Soviet society, specifically about the inclusion of the Jewish population.⁴⁹ In particular, Soviet partisans posed a danger for ghetto refugees when they suspected the Jews of working as spies for the German occupation regime. A number of Jews were killed for this reason when they requested admission into a partisan unit.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, partisan units were the only safe haven for ghetto refugees in Nazi-occupied Belorussia.

Several youths who managed to escape the ghetto and sure death found refuge in partisan units. Once there, they were compelled to show their existing or expected patriotic commitment. Grigorii Erenburg, for instance, having escaped

⁴⁹ The Soviet partisan movement during World War is the subject of many scholarly works, including Witalij Wilenchik, *Die Partisanenbewegung in Weißrussland, 1941–1944* (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 1984); Alexander Hill, *The War behind the Eastern Front: The Soviet Partisan Movement in North-West Russia* (New York: Frank Cass, 2005); Kenneth Slepian, *Stalin's Guerillas: Soviet Partisans in World War II* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2006). The often precarious existence of Jews within the Soviet partisan is addressed in Nechama Tec, *Defiance: The Bielski Partisans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Leonid Smilovitskii, "Antisemitism in the Soviet Partisan Movement, 1941–1944: The Case of Belorussia," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 20, no. 2 (2006): 207–34; Yitzhak Arad, *In the Shadow of the Red Banner* (New York/Jerusalem: Gefen, 2010).

⁵⁰ Shostak, Polya, Interview 20969, Brooklyn, October 11, 1996, *Visual History Archive*, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, accessed online at the USHMM on June 23, 2010. On the failure of the Soviet partisan movement to offer rescue for civilians, especially Jews, in search for help, see also Gregory Linkov ("Batya"), "Women Spies," in *Jewish Partisans: A Documentary of Jewish Resistance in the Soviet Union during World War II*, ed. Jack Porter (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1982), 164–7; Smolar, *The Minsk Ghetto*, 128; Kenneth Slepian, "The Soviet Partisan Movement and the Holocaust," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 14, no. 1 (2000): 4–5; Gerasimova, "Evrei v Partizanskom Dvizhenii Belorussii," 139ff; Leonid Smilovitskii, "Antisemitism in the Soviet Partisan Movement, 1941–1944: The Case of Belorussia," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 20, no. 2 (2006): esp. 140.

Bobruisk and having lost his mother and three siblings, entered a partisan unit where he “fought like a proper *Komsomolets* (member of the Communist Party’s youth organization).”⁵¹ Similarly, Boris Gal’perin became a combatant in a partisan unit where, he proclaimed, people shared in the “unconditional hatred for the enemy and everyone who had betrayed the Homeland and was loyal to the occupants.”⁵² Patriotism was a strong motive for the fighters, including Boris. His autobiography reflects his pride in his partisan accomplishments; he lists a number of successful operations against German supply trains or garrisons. In his interview, Gal’perin similarly mentioned that he even declined to be sent to the rear and, instead, chose to stay with the partisans and continue the fight against the German occupation.⁵³ At the same time, the unit commander suggested to him that he disguise his Jewish nationality to avoid humiliations and worse from fellow partisans.⁵⁴ Whereas all Soviet citizens were officially called on to fight the German occupants shoulder-to-shoulder, antisemitic attitudes precluded a true sense of collectivity and shared interest.

Most survivors of the Minsk ghetto, who were under eighteen during the war, managed to live through the war because they found a safe haven in a so-called “Jewish family unit.” The term “family unit” (or, interchangeably, “family camp”) describes “special Jewish partisan units where there were refugees from the ghettos or from executions, including elderly, minors, and women.”⁵⁵ In other words, these units were sites where mostly Jewish civilians found refuge from the threat of annihilation and took on specific tasks to ensure their own and other units’ existence. Between 6500 and 9000 (and by some estimates as many as 13,750) people lived in such units throughout the occupied Soviet Union; in Belorussia alone there were between 3700 and 5200 members.⁵⁶

⁵¹ Grigorii Erenburg, interviewed by author, St. Petersburg, April 25, 2001, and September 2, 2002, interviews in author’s possession.

⁵² Boris Mikhailovich Gal’perin, “Boris Mikhailovich Gal’perin” (unpublished autobiography, includes lists, maps, and sketches), St. Petersburg, 2000 (25 pages), copy in author’s possession, 10; Boris Gal’perin, interviewed by author, St. Petersburg, May 16, 2001, interview in author’s possession.

⁵³ In early 1943, the Soviet government ordered the evacuation of children within partisan units to the Russian rear, supplying airplanes for the transfer where possible or requesting that senior partisans accompany them across the frontline; see N.K. Petrova, “Deti Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voiny,” *Vtoraia Mirovaia Voina v Detskikh “Ramkakh Pamiati”: Sbornik Nauchnykh Statei*, ed. A. lu. Rozhkova (Krasnodar’: Ekoinvest, 2010), 223; Allevtina Kuprikhina, interviewed by author, September 6, 2002, St. Petersburg, interview in author’s possession.

⁵⁴ Boris Gal’perin, interviewed by author, St. Petersburg, May 16, 2001, interview in author’s possession.

⁵⁵ I.A. Al’tman, “Semeinye Lageria,” in *Kholokost na Territorii SSSR: Entsiklopedia*, ed. I. Al’tman (Moskva: ROSSPEN, 2009), 897–9.

⁵⁶ See Smilovitskii, *Katastrofa*, 125–7. In a brief mentioning of family camps as important spaces of survival, Yisrael Gutman estimates that up to ten thousand Jews survived the war in such camps; see Yisrael Gutman, *Fighters among the Ruins: The Story of Jewish Heroism during World War II* (Washington, D.C.: B’nai B’rith Books, 1988), 207. Yitzhak Arad, in his most recent study of Jewish participation in Soviet army units and partisan detachments, estimates that there were up to 13,750 Jews in family units in the German-occupied Soviet Union; see Arad, *In the Shadow*, 343.

Several hundred people gathered in one such partisan detachment under the command of Shalom Zorin, which was based in the *Nalibokskaiia Pushcha*, the forest in the area around Naliboki, west of Minsk. The unit had been set up by members of the underground movement in the Minsk ghetto. In the Minsk underground, people who had been active in the party, *Komsomol*, or trade unions before the war assembled in the fall of 1941 and began to organize sabotage actions and the rescue of activists and children.⁵⁷ In addition, the underground collected supplies, such as clothes, weapons, and medicine, for the partisans and also sent numerous ghetto inmates and activists to the forest to join the partisan movement. In several instances, however, antisemitic local partisan commanders refused admission to these Jews. The creation of the unit under Zorin was a reaction to these refusals, but it was also an attempt to address the consequences of occupation and genocide that displaced civilians on a massive scale, those who stood no chance of participating in combat missions yet needed a safe haven.

Shalom Zorin, a carpenter from Minsk, had escaped the Minsk ghetto and together with Semen Gazenko, a Soviet officer who had been captured by the Germans and also fled, established the partisan unit “Parkhomenko,” named after a hero from the Russian Civil War. When, in the spring of 1943, hundreds of Jews left the Minsk ghetto to escape a wave of killing actions, the Minsk underground approached the regional partisan headquarters. The activists demanded that the leadership respond to this mass escape and provide protection for the ghetto refugees. Under the protection of Ganzenko’s detachment, Zorin proceeded to organize a separate unit that would admit the civilians. As a so-called family unit, the detachment named after him eventually included roughly one hundred armed partisans and five hundred unarmed persons, including about 280 women and a hundred orphans. Among them were Samuil Volk, Rita Kazhdan, and Mikhail Treister. Except for children under ten years of age, the civilians were required to work; they collected the harvest from surrounding fields, prepared food, produced and mended clothes, shoes, and weapons for their own and other units in the area.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ See Leonid Smilovitsky, “Minsk Ghetto: An Issue of Jewish Resistance,” *SHVUT*, no. 1–2 (17/18) (1995): 161–82; Epstein, *The Minsk Ghetto*.

⁵⁸ The history of the Zorin unit is yet to be written. Details on the foundation and individual events within the detachment are to be found, among others, in: S. Shveibish, “Evreiskii Semeinii Partizanskii Otriad Sh. Zorina,” *Vestnik Evreiskogo Universiteta v Moskve*, no. 3(13) (1996): 88–109; Anatol Wertheim, “With Zorin in the Family Camp,” in *Minsk Yizkor Book* (Minsk, Jewish Mother City: Memorial Anthology), vol. II, ed. Shlomo Even-Shushan (Jerusalem, 1975), 392–5; Smolar, *The Minsk Ghetto*, 117; “The Minsk Ghetto,” in *The Complete Black Book of Russian Jewry*, Ehrenburg and Grossman, 109–55; Gerasimova, “Evrei v Partizanskom Dvizhenii Belorussii,” 142; Smilovitskii, *Katastrofa Evreev v Belorussii*, 120; Strelets, “Uchastie Evreev v Antigermanskom Soprotivlenii,” 133; Epstein, *The Minsk Ghetto*, 23; “Zorin,” in *Kholokost na Territorii SSSR: Entsiklopedia*, ed. I. Al’tman (Moskva: ROSSPEN, 2009), 337; D. Romanovskii, “Minsk,” *Kholokost na Territorii SSSR: Entsiklopedia*, 590–602. See also my forthcoming book *Jewish Youth in Ghettos and Forests* (Oxford University Press, 2014), which includes an extended portrayal of the unit and its internal organization.

The unit was at once a safe haven and a reminder of the shared experience of being persecuted as Jews; it produced a community identified by national origin that, especially for the youth, had not existed prior to the war. Zoia Oboz, who had realized that she had lost everyone by the time she arrived in the unit, found a substitute family: “My friend Ida’s mother Rakhil then began to take care of me. She made sure I ate and washed myself. Then we moved to the winter camp, and there I ended up in a big *zemlianka* (Russian: dugout) with many other children. We often gathered around the wood stove.”⁵⁹ Alongside the *zemliankas*, dwellings built partially underground with logs and branches that housed between five and forty partisans in the forests, sitting around the campfire provided opportunities for the youth to share stories and memories with their “partisan brothers.”⁶⁰ Similarly, Rita Kazhdan fondly remembered her “partisan sisters” Polya and Sonia Shostok with whom she and her younger brother Gera built a common hut.⁶¹ Sharing the experience of survival in moments of scarcity and danger required mutual support, yet also resulted in a strong emotional bond among the young women and other youths.

As part of the Soviet partisan movement, moreover, the Zorin unit also provided integration into the fold of Soviet society more generally. In a unit school run by recent prewar graduates of the Minsk Pedagogical Institute, children who had reached school age during the war were instructed in basic reading and writing.⁶² Lessons also included materials on patriotic partisans, the value of communism and loyalty to Lenin and Stalin, and the power of the Soviet regime, presentations that were similar in scope to the *Politzaniatia* (Russian: *Politicheskie Zaniatia*, lessons in politics) that youth and young adults had received before the war.⁶³ Samuil Volk asserted, for instance, that “they told us whatever was interesting and important, they spoke about what happened at the front, where our troops were, that they were advancing toward us and such things.”⁶⁴ These narrations indicate that schooling in the partisan unit had several goals. Along with the teaching of basic literacy, this education aimed at re-establishing the adolescents’ trust in the power of the Soviet state to liberate them from Nazi violence and to provide for a bright future.

⁵⁹ Oboz, Zoia, Interview 29477, Minsk, January 25, 1997, *Visual History Archive*, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, accessed online at the USHMM on July 21, 2010.

⁶⁰ Iakhontova, Amalia, Interview 43211, Novosibirsk, April 16, 1998, *Visual History Archive*, USC Shoah Foundation Institute.

⁶¹ Rita Kazhdan, interviewed by author, St. Petersburg, May 24, 2001, interview in author’s possession.

⁶² Saga’chik, Anna, Interview 27830, Alma-Ata, March 4, 1997, *Visual History Archive*, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, accessed online at the USHMM on July 22, 2010; Vladimir Mordkhilevich, June 8, 1995, USHMM, RG-50.120*209; Zalesskaia, Sonia, Interview 30810, Minsk, May 4, 1997, *Visual History Archive*, USC Shoah Foundation Institute; Treister, Mikhail, Interview 2324, St. Petersburg, April 23, 1995, *Visual History Archive*, USC Shoah Foundation Institute.

⁶³ Vladimir Mordkhilevich, June 8, 1995, USHMM, RG-50.120*209.

⁶⁴ Volk, Samuil, Interview 43231, Novosibirsk, April 15, 1997, *Visual History Archive*, USC Shoah Foundation Institute; similarly, Vladimir Mordkhilevich, June 8, 1995, USHMM, RG-50.120*209.

Re-establishing the dominance of Soviet ideology was a strong motive of the leadership of the *Komsomol*, the party's youth organization, to get involved in the organization of the partisan units and the educational programs offered there. Activists were sent to (or, if they had joined the units on their own, assisted in organizing) information sessions in the occupied territories. State and party leadership hoped that through this instruction and through readings from newspaper reports about the course of the war and the achievements of the army and the partisan movement, Soviet youth would turn into "real partisans," fighters able to effectively resist German rule and participate in the defense of the Soviet Union.⁶⁵

The Communist Party, Pioneer, and *Komsomol* organizations directed educational and cultural activities within partisan and army detachments that fostered the interpretation of the war as an attack on the Soviet Union as a whole and as the fight of Nazism against Communism. The interpretive framework delivered by party and state propaganda and in school lessons included references to the brutality of invasion and occupation and appealed to patriotic sentiments. Soviet media and party instructors presented individuals' experiences as shared by the whole Soviet population and urged everyone to participate in the campaign for victory, even if at the potential expense of their own lives. Several interviewees mentioned that reports of the Siege of Leningrad, the nine hundred-day encirclement of, and subsequent famine in, the city, and the exemplary and heroic struggle of its people were frequent themes of political education during the war.⁶⁶ Vladimir Mordkhilevich gave an example:

Feigelman [the Political Commissar of the unit] once talked about the siege of Leningrad. His last words were: "if you ever see a person from Leningrad, you ought to bow to them." For us, who had just survived the ghetto, it appeared that it had been even worse there, in Leningrad. And I fulfilled this task when I had colleagues from the city after the war.⁶⁷

Mordkhilevich's account points to a problematic tendency in the official Soviet war portrayal. Forms of suffering such as those that he and his peers had endured in the Minsk ghetto were rarely included in accounts of the war, whereas the starvation and agony that cost the lives of more than one million residents of Leningrad were interpreted as sacrificial heroism and celebrated,

⁶⁵ Slepyan, *Stalin's Guerillas*, 193; Catriona Kelly, *Children's World: Growing up in Russia, 1890–1991* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 115ff.

⁶⁶ Boris Mikhailovich Gal'perin, "Boris Mikhailovich Gal'perin," 16; Allevtina Kuprikhina, interviewed by author, St. Petersburg, September 6, 2002, interview in author's possession.

⁶⁷ Vladimir Mordkhilevich, June 8, 1995, USHMM, RG-50.120*209.

both during and after the war.⁶⁸ The problem is not that the victims of the siege and starvation in Leningrad are remembered; rather, it is that their suffering and death acquire meaning within the larger state narrative of the war, while the systematic killing of Jewish civilians by bullets, solely because of their national identity, remains largely unnoted and is thus rendered meaningless. Commemorative practices, such as erecting gravestones that identify the bodies buried in adjacent mass graves as “Soviet citizens,” erase the memory of the genocide of Jews and elide the memory that Soviet citizens participated in the murder campaigns, thus demonstrating the tensions within the multinational Soviet society.

The exact number of Jewish youth among the partisans is difficult to determine, yet among the thirty thousand children estimated to have been within Belorussian partisan formations, there were a substantial number of ghetto refugees.⁶⁹ The partisan units in particular were both safe havens, maintaining crucial necessities in the form of food, shelter, and care, and sites of multiple forms of sabotage and combat. As a whole, the partisan effort relied on cooperation across the divisions that the Nazi occupation regime attempted to draw, and to a large extent succeeded in drawing, between Jews and non-Jews, Communists and non-Communists. Antisemitic tendencies among partisans or local population clearly undermined these efforts, and they testify to the tenuous position that Jews occupied in this period. Yet, the few refugees from the ghetto who survived the German occupation of Belorussia were able to do so because of personal or institutional efforts to revitalize and extend interethnic solidarity and internationalist patriotism.

Following liberation, many Jewish male teenagers like Samuil Volk were included in Soviet army units or were transferred to military academies where they would spend crucial years of education and training in peacetime. Young women, in contrast, went on to work in partisan and party headquarters, helping to rebuild the destroyed country and society. Elena Drapkina, for instance, worked as a secretary in the regional staff headquarters of the partisan movement for a few months before she moved to Leningrad and began to study dentistry. Together with their non-Jewish compatriots, the veterans celebrated Victory Day in 1945 and its subsequent anniversaries, sang the Buchenwald Song (an often used song commemorating the sufferings and struggle of prisoners of

⁶⁸ Publications addressing the official Soviet war memory and its tendency to exclude civilian suffering and everyday life while focusing on military heroism and victorious struggle include Nina Tumarkin, *The Living and the Dead: The Rise and Fall of the Cult of World War II in Russia* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); Sabine Arnold, *Stalingrad im sowjetischen Gedächtnis: Kriegserinnerung und Geschichtsbild im totalitären Staat* (Bochum: Projekt-Verlag, 1998); “*Wir sind die Herren dieses Landes*”: *Ursachen, Verlauf und Folgen des deutschen Überfalls auf die Sowjetunion*, ed. Babette Quinkert (Hamburg: VSA, 2002); *Pamiat’ o Voine: 60 Let Spustia: Rossia, Germania, Evropa*, ed. Mikhail Gabovich (Moskva: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2005); Catherine Merridale, *Ivan’s War: Life and Death in the Red Army, 1939–1945* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006).

⁶⁹ Petrova, “*Deti Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voiny*,” 223.

the concentration camp Buchenwald), and joined the mourning for victims of fascist persecution. Grigorii Erenburg, Boris Gal'perin, Elena Drapkina, and others who had participated in Soviet partisan units joined veteran organizations and reminisced about their experiences during the war. Those who were in family units or who had survived in hiding, however, were denied access to benefits allocated to war veterans and thus were repeatedly reminded of their difference, of being Jewish and not fully integrated into Soviet society. All Jewish survivors continued to struggle with the loss of most, if not all, relatives, as well as crucial family and social networks and with the absence of public reminders of the systematic murder of Soviet Jews. Thus, Soviet Jews were at once part and not part of the Soviet commemorative community, a situation that reproduced a simultaneity of, and tension between, competing forms of identification that reflected both inherently contradictory state policies and processes of secularization and Sovietization among young Soviet Jews in the 1930s: the legal categorization as Jewish by nationality, which was institutionalized with the internal passport but had no meaning for people's self-identification, and the self-perception and participation of these Jews in Soviet society as Soviet persons as propagated by the state. After the war, however, this contradiction between state policies (of identification) and cultural affinities re-emerged in the form of a strained relationship between individuals and the state, when the attempts of people of Jewish nationality who had survived Nazi occupation and genocide to affirm Jewish cultural identity or commemorate Jewish victims as Jewish victims were curtailed by the state in favor of constructing a collective Soviet war memory that did not allow for differential remembering along the lines of Soviet citizens' nationality.

Conclusion: Soviet Institutions and Memories of Internationalism

Oral accounts, such as Samuil Volk's, are crucial sources for studying the Nazi genocide in the occupied Soviet territories; they reveal how people trapped by the German occupation regime confronted it. More importantly, paying attention to generational specificities of these accounts enhances an understanding of the Holocaust in the occupied Soviet territories that goes beyond adding another "untold story." Life histories of the first generation of Soviet Jews who survived the German occupation and genocide during World War II show that the experience of the Nazi genocide played a formative role in people's evaluation of Soviet policies, especially with regard to nationalities such as the Jewish one. Rather than highlighting the destructive elements of 1930s' Soviet policies, a tendency familiar from scholarship on the period, interviewees foreground positive experiences of interethnic solidarity and friendship. The difference is in large part motivated by the enthusiasm about building a new society that these

young Jews participated in and by the shock and disillusionment that followed the destruction of this society-in-the-making brought on by war and displacement during the German occupation. The contradiction between different portrayals thus does not devalue the positive portrayal of the 1930s. Instead, it is a powerful reminder that the construction of memory is deeply intertwined with the placement and evaluation of a distinct life period within a whole life's experience. In the oral histories we confront the product of a complex relationship between experience and memory, where shock at Nazi violence and disappointment about the fragility of Soviet internationalism helps highlight the promise of a future that never arrived but that appeared real in the 1930s.

The experiences of orphaned children and their everyday struggle for survival provide an important lens through which we can come to understand the scope and force of Nazi terror. These young orphans personify the detached Jewish individual removed from political community that the Nazi regime strove to produce and, finally, to annihilate. Stripped of political and legal personhood, as Hannah Arendt has noted, Jews were forced into private existence, existence that could "be adequately dealt with only by the unpredictable hazards of friendship and sympathy."⁷⁰ For Soviet Jewish youth, survival against a collective trauma of war and genocide was enabled by interpersonal bonds that drew on the shared experience of war and on a sense of belonging to a collective built before the German occupation.

Detachments such as the Zorin family unit provided vital support and also had an integrative function for the children and adolescents who fled the ghetto. Schooling, party lessons portraying the war as an attack on all Soviet citizens, and military discipline reinstated a sense of stability and order into the youths' lives. While the state portrayal of war and occupation as a shared experience of the whole Soviet population came at the cost of denying the role of antisemitism and collaboration for the Jews' suffering, the concrete bonds with other members of the detachment, as well as the partly real partly imagined ties with other Soviet citizens, recreated a sense of belonging and purpose that was familiar from the 1930s and that was essential for both physical and emotional survival during the war.

At the same time, the family units coalesced because Jews were persecuted as Jews. Before the war, young Soviet Jews hardly formed a distinct community. The Nazi persecution forced this communality upon them, while also revealing rifts within the Soviet population generally, grounded in antisemitic prejudice and aggression. In that sense, the experience of the Nazi genocide was

⁷⁰ See Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1968), 301: "The human being who has lost his place in a community, his political status in the struggle of his time, and the legal personality which makes his actions and part of his destiny a consistent whole, is left with those qualities which usually can become articulate only in the sphere of private life and must remain unqualified, mere existence in all matters of public concern."

instrumental for the revival of a Soviet Jewish collective identity.⁷¹ Experiences such as denied admissions in partisan units, the necessity to hide Jewish identity in Soviet units, or the emerging collectivity in family units reinforced this revival of a Jewish self-identification, one that was, however, infused with reminders of belonging to the patriotic and internationalist Soviet society.

Nazi persecution, wartime Soviet antisemitism, and revival of Jewish identity brought the alternative, an internationalist community, into sharp relief and let the memory of it override more problematic elements of Soviet experience. The 1930s were, in many areas of the Soviet Union, a time of ethnic cleansing, famine, and purges. Almost none of this figured prominently in interviewees' accounts of the time. One could argue that this is the result of people's continued presence under the influence of Soviet ideology and propaganda, which would prohibit a critique of problematic aspects of Soviet history. Narrators, however, did not hesitate to speak openly about the disappointment they experienced in light of postwar restrictions for individual and collective Jewish life or the anti-semitism they saw at work in Soviet practices of commemoration that marginalized the shootings of their family members or their work in the family units.⁷²

Memory is the product of a relational reconstruction; it is a representation of the past that is developed by comparing personal experiences of one time period and context to another. Positing prewar policies aimed at universal equality in contrast to wartime violence designed to create the opposite, a racially stratified society, elderly Jews in the former Soviet Union produce troubling accounts. In these accounts, the problematic aspects of Soviet policies striving for the common good and collective progress, such as disallowing for differential cultural identity or the state's failure to balance industrial development with people's need for food, move into the background. Following scholars who have analyzed the dynamics of collective memory and the role of ideology in the construction of subjectivity, we need to take into account the role of Soviet state institutions that had a formative impact on how individuals interpret their own lives and locate themselves vis-à-vis society, in this case, the role of schools, party, and youth organizations, but also the propaganda and educational activities pursued by the Soviet state within the partisan movement.

At the same time and, perhaps, more importantly, we cannot underestimate the role of historical experience itself. For many people living in the Soviet Union, notions of social equality and multinational communality were valuable and appeared to be partly realized in the 1930s and, during the war, re-emerged

⁷¹ Elena E. Nosenko-Shtein, "O kollektivnoi pamiati rossiiskikh evreev na rubezhe vekov (predvaritel'nye nabliudeniia)," *Etnograficheskoe Obozrenie* 6 (2009): 20–29.

⁷² Anika Walke, "It Wasn't that Bad in the Ghetto, Was It?" – Living On in the USSR after the Nazi Genocide," in *Survivors of Nazi Persecution in Europe after the Second World War: Landscapes after Battle*, vol. 1, eds. Suzanne Bardgett et al. (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2010), 218–36.

as powerful forces facilitating survival. The breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, subsequent food shortages, and resurfacing interethnic conflicts cumulating in open war marked the final blow to this vision of a Soviet society. Interviews in the late 1990s and early 2000s in the former Soviet Union thus reflect the impact of multiple layers of experience and interpretation on the construction of memory in oral histories. By recognizing the impact of both Soviet ideology and the actual personal experience of socialism and internationalism, together with their breakdown, first with the Nazi invasion, later on with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, on the lives and minds of Soviet citizens, we can gain a better understanding of both the Holocaust and Jewish responses in the Soviet Union and of Soviet nationality policies and their effects on individuals.

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