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## THE SOVIET NARRATIVE OF THE WARSAW GHETTO UPRISING\*

### Abstract

Soviet ideological overseers did not consider the Warsaw Ghetto uprising an utterly taboo topic. However, on their general scale of notable events of the Second World War, the uprising belonged to the category of relatively minor episodes, worth mentioning mainly in the context of ‘more important’ themes, such as the presence of former Nazis in state institutions of West Germany or the collaboration of some Jews, most notably Zionists, with the Nazis. At the same time, the Soviet Yiddish periodicals, first *Eynikayt* [Unity, 1942–8] and then *Sovetish Heymland* [Soviet Homeland, 1961–91] did not treat the uprising as an event of secondary importance. Instead, they emphasise the heroism of the ghetto fighters.

**Keywords:** Holocaust memorialisation, Holocaust instrumentalisation, Soviet press, Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, *Sovetish Heymland*

### I INTRODUCTION

Before 22 June 1941, when Germany began its offensive against the USSR, the Soviet press did not contain any information about the treatment of Jews in Nazi-occupied Poland. Instead, it focused on the theme of liberating Polish Jews in September 1939 from living in an almost ‘medieval’ society, under the pressure of anti-Semitic policies and stereotypes. One of the treatments of this theme was the article ‘[My] Journey to the Country of Yesterday’, published in the weekly

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*Sovetskoye iskusstvo* on 29 September 1939. In it, Aleksandra Brushtein, daughter of Jakub Wygodzki (Yankev Vygodsky), a prominent figure in the Vilnius Jewish community who would serve as the prototype for the protagonist of her 1950s trilogy *The Road Leads Off in the Distance* [*Droga biegnie w dal* in the 1959 Polish translation], recalled her visit in interwar Vilnius (then Wilno in Poland). In Brushtein's words, the trip left her with an impression that "a crazy projectionist drove the film tape in reverse – backwards, to tsarist Russia". She once again "experienced the return of the long-forgotten 'feeling of my nose', that is an almost physical sensation of having several extra millimetres in its length", which attracted the same stigma as "medieval *peyes* [side locks] and a *lapersdak* [long frock coat]".<sup>1</sup>

The Jewish aspect of Nazi atrocities, silenced during the entire period defined by the August 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, emerged in Moscow newspapers a few days after the outbreak of the Soviet-German hostilities in June 1941, and continued to be mentioned, at times even receiving detailed coverage, during the entire course of the war and later on as well.<sup>2</sup> On 25 June, *Izvestiya*, the second most important daily of national circulation, printed an unsigned article entitled 'In the Kingdom of Terror and Disempowerment'. The readers learned that:

The German fascists had established for Polish Jews a regime that pales compared to all horrors of the Middle Ages. In Warsaw, Lublin, and other cities, hundreds of thousands of people had been herded into ghettos – neighbourhoods surrounded with barbed wire and guarded by watchmen. These people are doomed to die out.<sup>3</sup>

Two days later, *Pravda*, the most important Soviet daily, added some details concerning the situation in the Warsaw ghetto. The article, entitled 'Hatred of German Occupiers Is Limitless', was by-lined Tadeusz Kruszewski (*Тадеуш Крушевский*) and explained that, while the Polish population had been suffering greatly under the yoke of fascist

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<sup>1</sup> Александра Яковлевна Бруштейн, 'Путешествие в страну Вчера', *Советское искусство* (29 Sept. 1939), 6.

<sup>2</sup> Mordechai Altshuler, 'The Holocaust in the Soviet Mass Media during the War and in the First Postwar Years Re-examined', *Yad Vashem Studies*, xxxix, 2 (2011), 121–68.

<sup>3</sup> 'В царстве террора и бесправия', *Известия*, 148 (25 June 1941), 4.

barbarians, the disaster that fell upon the about 600,000 starving and otherwise savagely mistreated Jews in the Warsaw ghetto was incomparably more horrific.<sup>4</sup> Described as a letter written in March 1941 in Warsaw, but delivered through the USA, the article was reprinted or digested in numerous outlets.<sup>5</sup>

Both newspapers published more pieces about the situation in Warsaw in general and in the Jewish ghetto in particular. The most extensive front-page coverage appeared in *Pravda* on 19 December 1942.<sup>6</sup> Other materials in that issue informed Soviet readers about the statement made by Antony Eden, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, who stressed the responsibility of the German nation for allowing its government to pursue the annihilation of the Jewish people, and promised to provide help to those Jews who would successfully flee the occupied territories. The same page in *Pravda* carried a summary of a statement by Stephen Wise, President of the World Jewish Congress, and a reference to a *New York Times* article about the suicide of Adam Czerniaków, head -- the newspaper called him 'mayor' -- of the Warsaw ghetto Jewish council. He poisoned himself to death (this happened five months earlier, in July 1942) after the Germans ordered him to prepare lists for deportation to death camps. Meanwhile, in the same 19 December issue, *Izvestiya* wrote that the number of Jews still surviving in the Warsaw ghetto hardly exceeded 40,000.<sup>7</sup>

The following text of this article will focus predominantly on the Soviet press's handling of the 1943 uprising in the ghetto.

## II

### A 'MINOR' EVENT

The uprising in the Warsaw ghetto in April 1943 did not attract the immediate attention of the major Soviet newspapers. Most probably, this had to do with the concurrent propaganda warfare caused by, first,

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<sup>4</sup> Тадеуш Крушевский, 'Ненависть к германским оккупантам безгранична', *Правда* (27 June 1941), 6.

<sup>5</sup> For instance: *Под игом фашистских захватчиков*, I (Москва, 1941), 3–8; Б. Ольгин, 'Под игом фашистских захватчиков', *Красный Север* (31 Aug. 1941), 4.

<sup>6</sup> 'Об осуществлении гитлеровскими властями плана истребления еврейского населения Европы', *Правда* (19 Dec. 1942), 1.

<sup>7</sup> 'Истребление еврейского населения в оккупированных гитлеровской Германией странах Европы', *ibid.*, 4.

the Germans' announcement that they had found and identified the graves of murdered Polish officers, and second, Stalin's decision to sever relations with the Polish government in exile after the latter refused to refute the accusation that it was the Soviets who had carried out the Katyn massacre.<sup>8</sup> Finally, on 29 May 1943, already after the tragic end of the ghetto uprising, Boris Ponomarev, a leading *Pravda* journalist, referred to it as an example of how the Red Army's victory in Stalingrad made the resistance movement stronger in Nazi-occupied Europe:

The steadfast fight of the Jewish population in the Warsaw ghetto against the German cannibals lasted about a month. The Hitlerites had decided to wipe the ghetto from the face of the earth and kill the hundreds of thousands of people there. But this time, the Hitlerites met fierce resistance. Surrounded in the ghetto, people were fighting with great ferocity; they lacked enough weapons and took up stones, they blew up the houses entered by German police. They turned the ghetto into a fortress, at the siege of which many German policemen and Gestapo officers found their death.

The Polish population has been helping Jews in the fight with their common enemy.<sup>9</sup>

Earlier, on 15 May 1943, a description of the Warsaw ghetto uprising appeared in the small-circulation Moscow Yiddish newspaper *Eynikayt*, which came out at that time as a weekly. Its publisher, the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (JAFC), was established as a propaganda unit, but became widely perceived and increasingly acted as an unelected representative body of Soviet Jewry. The article was authored by Ber (Bernard) Mark, one of the Polish Jewish communists working for the JAFC.<sup>10</sup> Mark, from 1949 director of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, would continue to write about the Warsaw ghetto until the end of his life in 1966. His early historical narrative took shape as a 70-page brochure *Powstanie w ghetcie warszawskim* [Warsaw Ghetto Uprising], published in Moscow in 1944 under the auspices

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<sup>8</sup> Ewa M. Thompson, 'The Katyn Massacre and the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in the Soviet-Nazi Propaganda War', in John and Carol Garrard (eds), *World War 2 and the Soviet People* (New York, 1993), 213–32.

<sup>9</sup> Борис Пономарев, 'Непрочный тыл "европейской крепости"', *Правда* (29 May 1943), 4.

<sup>10</sup> Dov Ber Kerler, 'The Soviet Yiddish Press: *Eynikayt* During the War, 1942–1945', in Robert Moses Shapiro (ed.), *Why Didn't the Press Shout? American and International Journalism during the Holocaust* (Jersey City, N.J., 2003), 221–49, here 227.

of the Soviet-sponsored Union of Polish Patriots, and the following year reprinted in Paris.

From the very beginning, members of the JAFС faced the problem of protecting themselves from the accusation of producing ‘nationalist’ materials, praising the Jews’ readiness to sacrifice their lives for victory over the enemy. In November 1943, seeking to cool the ideological watchdogs’ ire, Shachno Epshtein, executive secretary of the JAFС and editor of *Eynikayt*, wrote to Aleksandr Shcherbakov, one of the top Party officials, in an attempt to justify their strategy on this issue:

Jewish themes do not dominate our materials, but merely serve as a means to demonstrate the many aspects of our country’s greatness and might. ... It is typical that not only the Jewish press, but even the communist press asks us to provide material exclusively about the life of Jews in the USSR because Hitler’s agents abroad are using every means to spread vile lies showing, on the one hand, that Jews do not fight, and on the other hand, that antisemitism is raging in our country.<sup>11</sup>

The presence of antisemitism in wartime public attitudes had caused deep concern on the part of the JAFС. Generally unfounded rumours were widespread about Jews shirking military service or showing cowardice. The phrase “Jews fight in Tashkent”, Uzbekistan’s capital thousands of kilometres from the front lines, gained currency in various quarters of society. As a resultant reaction, many Jews invested time and energy in collecting facts and statistics showing the reality of the Jewish participation in the fight against the Nazi enemy. This ‘counter-Tashkent syndrome’ also revealed itself in the editorial policy of *Eynikayt*.<sup>12</sup> Thus, it is small wonder that its editors and writers devoted attention to the revolts in the Warsaw and other ghettos, emphasising courage as a Jewish ethnic characteristic. Ilya Ehrenburg, arguably the most popular Soviet journalist at the time and a member of the JAFС, formulated this idea in general terms in an article on the Warsaw ghetto uprising: “They salvaged nothing

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<sup>11</sup> Shimon Redlich, Kiril M. Anderson, and Ilya Altman, *War, Holocaust and Stalinism: A Documented Study of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee in the USSR* (Luxembourg, 1995), 288.

<sup>12</sup> For more, see Геннадий Эстрайх, ‘Смертельно опасное национальное единение’, in *id.* and Александр Френкель (eds), *Советская гениза: новые архивные разыскания по истории евреев в СССР*, i (Boston–St. Petersburg, 2020), 311–12.

except honour—their own and that of their people”.<sup>13</sup> In the JAFC’s 1944 New Year’s address to American Jews, we can read: “The heroic revolt of the Jews of the Warsaw Ghetto was a fine response to the deeds of the ever-growing family of heroes in the Red Army and among the partisans”.<sup>14</sup>

In the post-war years, however, the topic of Jews in the war basically disappeared from the pages of *Eynikayt*, except for publications devoted to particular ‘round dates’, such as the fifth anniversary of the revolt in the Warsaw ghetto.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, Vasily Grossman’s article, written to mark the anniversary, could not appear in print. The article by the well-established author, whose 1943 story ‘The Old Teacher’ became a pioneering endeavour to write narrative prose about the Holocaust, was deemed “wicked, since it is detached from the concrete fight against fascism and as such flies somewhere in the air. In addition, it does not mobilise, and does not call to fight in reaction to fascism”.<sup>16</sup>

In the meantime, books that appeared in Moscow under the imprint of the publishing house for Jewish literature, *Der Emes*, testified to the fact that the need among the Jewish intelligentsia to hail Jewish heroism remained strong. Among the Yiddish titles were Ber Mark’s *Der ufshtand fun varshever geto* [The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising] and Hersh (Grzegorz) Smolar’s *Fun minsker geto* [From the Minsk Ghetto]. Smolar’s book also came out in Russian. By 1948 (the fifth anniversary of the uprising), both Polish communists already lived in Warsaw. Mark became known, and criticised in non-communist circles, as an ideologically biased historian who, in an inversion of historical reality, described the uprising as a heroic act single-handedly organised and led by the communist underground.<sup>17</sup> Smolar’s memoir-based version of the resistance movement in the Belorussian capital followed

<sup>13</sup> See Arkadi Zeltser, ‘How the Jewish Intelligentsia Created the Jewishness of the Jewish Hero: The Soviet Yiddish Press’, in Harriet Murav and Gennady Estraiikh (eds), *Soviet Jews in World War II: Fighting, Witnessing, Remembering* (Brighton, 2014), 104–28, here 113.

<sup>14</sup> ‘U.S. Jews Get Soviet New Year’s Greeting’, *Daily Worker* (6 Jan. 1944), 2.

<sup>15</sup> Zeltser, ‘How the Jewish Intelligentsia’, 113.

<sup>16</sup> Юлия А. Волохова, ‘Забытое свидетельство из освобожденной Варшавы’, *Вопросы литературы*, 2 (2020), 13–27, here 18.

<sup>17</sup> Joanna Nalewajko-Kulikov, ‘Three Colours: Grey. Study for a Portrait of Bernard Mark’, *Holocaust Studies and Materials: Journal of the Polish Center for Holocaust Research* (2010), 206–26.

the same line, which disappeared in the edition prepared by Smolar after he emigrated to Israel.

Smolar, who from 1946 headed the Culture and Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of Polish Jews (in 1949 he would succeed Adolf Berman, one of the leaders of the underground in the Warsaw ghetto and then the head of the Central Committee of Polish Jews), was in regular telephone contact with Itsik Fefer, chairman of the JAFK after the death – in reality, murder at the hands of the Soviet secret police – of Solomon Mikhoels, his predecessor, in January 1948. At the beginning of 1948, they spoke mainly about organising a Soviet delegation's participation in the unveiling of the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes in Warsaw. By that time, Fefer's poem *Shotns fun varshever geto* [Shadows of the Warsaw Ghetto] had several editions, both in the Soviet Union and abroad, and was enthusiastically received in Jewish left-wing circles.<sup>18</sup> Ultimately, the unveiling of the memorial took place on 19 April, the fifth anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, but, disappointingly to both Smolar and Fefer, with no Soviet Jewish representatives present at the ceremony.<sup>19</sup>

However, this did not mean that Soviet ideological overseers considered the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising to be a controversial, taboo topic in the Soviet Union. The Soviet press (e.g. *Izvestiya* on 20 July 1951) reported on the trial of Jürgen Stroop, general SS who was in charge of suppressing the uprising. An attentive reader could also find information about the uprising in newspaper and book publications on the Nuremberg trials. A fragment of Fefer's poem came out in Russian as part of a 1957 collection of his poetry, *Izbrannoye* [Selected Works], put out by the Moscow publishing house Sovetsky Pisatel, while the play 'The Uprising in the [Warsaw] Ghetto' by the Yiddish poet and playwright Shmuel Halkin (Samuil Galkin) found a place in the latter's 1958 collection *Stikhi. Ballady. Dramy* [Poems. Ballads. Plays].

Nevertheless, on the Soviet ideologists' broad scale of notable events of the Second World War, the uprising was categorised as a relatively minor episode. This lower place on the scale found its

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<sup>18</sup> See, e.g., Itsik Fefer, *Shotns fun varshever geto* (New York, 1945). A revised version appeared in Itsik Fefer's book *Shayn un opshayn* (Moskve, 1946). See also 'Evening of Jewish Drama, Song and Dance at J. P. I. [Jewish People's Institute]', *Sentinel* (15 Feb. 1945), 18, and 'What's on?', *Daily Worker* (15 April 1948), 7.

<sup>19</sup> Hersh Smolar, *Oyf der letster pozitsye mit der letster hofenung* (Tel-Aviv, 1982), 103–17.

reflection in, for instance, the story *A Night in Warsaw* by Lev Slavin, a Russian-language prose and scriptwriter of Jewish background, who built a plot around the 1944 Warsaw uprising. A fragment of the story appeared in December 1947 in the Moscow weekly journal *Ogonek*. The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising is mentioned in Slavin's narrative simply as a 'Jewish mutiny' [*evreisky myatezh*], whereas what had happened in Warsaw in 1944 is described as an 'uprising', albeit an 'untimely' one and "instigated by political opportunists from the London-based Polish government in exile".<sup>20</sup>

The Nazi atrocities towards the Jews were open, albeit infrequently mentioned, secret in the Soviet press. Most often, Holocaust-related publications (though the appellation itself, "Holocaust", would not be mentioned at all) aimed to show how former military officers and functionaries of the Nazi regime had not been brought to justice, which allegedly – and in many cases actually – happened due to the negligence, manipulation or protection of state institutions and authorities in Western countries, especially in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). Soviet periodicals printed accounts, sometimes in detail, as irrefutable evidence of the atrocities committed by the individuals in question. Thus, on 11 September 1954, the newspaper *Literaturnaya gazeta*, an organ of the Soviet Writers Union, featured an article, 'An Ominous Amnesty', which in particular related the story of the acquittal of twenty members of the FRG police force tried in Dortmund on charges of murdering Jews in the Warsaw ghetto.<sup>21</sup>

The Warsaw ghetto could appear in a Soviet newspaper also without using the words 'Jew' and 'Jewish' or otherwise mentioning that it had anything to do with Jews. Thus, on 14 September 1955, an article ('A City Risen from Ruins') in the Moscow newspaper *Gudok* described the successful reconstruction of the Polish capital, particularly its Muranów district

built on the place where, during the occupation, the German fascists established a ghetto. The history of this neighbourhood is full of tragedy. SS-men herded hundreds of thousands of people to this walled and barb-wired part of the city and regularly sent from there transports of those condemned to annihilation in the ovens of Majdanek and Auschwitz. Brought to despair, people decided to die in battle. In April 1943, they started an uprising.

<sup>20</sup> Лев Славин, 'Варшавская ночь', *Огонёк*, 50 (1947), 17.

<sup>21</sup> Д.У., 'Зловещая амнистия', *Литературная газета* (11 Sept. 1954), 4.



The Hitlerites, in their turn, used aviation and artillery to raze to the ground the area of two square kilometres. Six hundred thousand people perished there. Now, there stands here a memorial to heroes of the ghetto, and new buildings raised as if to symbolise the unstoppable force of life.<sup>22</sup>

This is not a unique example of the ‘universalisation’ practised in the Soviet press. There is no mentioning of Jews in the information that featured in *Izvestiya* in October 1960 about the British censorship ban on the film *The Warsaw Ghetto* (the reason was that the film contained very graphic footage).<sup>23</sup> Olga Gershenson writes about the Soviet memorialisation of Janusz Korczak, the Jewish aspect of whose story was underplayed, making him “a universal humanist hero. The Holocaust, in this case, was both externalised and universalised”.<sup>24</sup> As early as 1945, the Sverdlovsk youth newspaper *Na smenu!* published a poem about Korczak by Bella Dizhur, whose son, Ernst Neizvestny, a Red Army officer at the time, would become a prominent sculptor. Dizhur learned about Korczak from a Polish Jewish refugee.<sup>25</sup>

A short, illustrated travelogue of Aleksandr Zhitomirsky, the artist-in-chief of the glossy propaganda journal *Soviet Union* (which appeared in a score of languages), constitutes another example of ‘universalisation’.<sup>26</sup> Published in the Moscow weekly *Sovetskaya kultura*, it mentions the Warsaw ghetto monument dedicated to *people* murdered by the fascists. As in other cases, we do not know if Zhitomirsky (who was Jewish) decided to avoid using the word ‘Jewish’ or if the editors removed it. His travelogue appeared in October 1958, the year of the 15th anniversary of the uprising.

This also marked the year when, for the first time, an official Soviet delegation came to Warsaw to participate in the ceremonies marking the anniversary. The delegation included three people: the twice Hero of the Soviet Union, general David Dragunsky (in 1956 he was sent to the inauguration of the Memorial to the Unknown Jewish Martyr

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<sup>22</sup> В. Блинов, ‘Город, вставший из руин’, *Гудок* (14 Sept. 1955), 4.

<sup>23</sup> ‘Они бояться правды’, *Известия* (27 Oct. 1960), 2.

<sup>24</sup> Olga Gershenson, *The Phantom Holocaust: Soviet Cinema and Jewish Catastrophe* (New Brunswick, 2013), 115.

<sup>25</sup> Дмитрий Шеваров, ‘Януш и Белла’, *Российская газета* (10 April 2014), <https://rg.ru/2014/04/10/bella.html> [Accessed: 26 May 2021].

<sup>26</sup> Александр Житомирский, ‘У польских друзей’, *Советская культура* (25 Oct. 1958), 4.

in Paris); the veteran of the war and poet Evgeni Dolmatovsky; and the Hero of the Soviet Union Vladimir Pavlov, who was not Jewish.<sup>27</sup> The latter was also a writer, and his note about the trip appeared in *Literaturnaya gazeta*.<sup>28</sup> Characteristically, the choice had fallen on Dolmatovsky, a Jewish poet who wrote in Russian, rather than on one of the Yiddish authors. Although the most prominent Yiddish writers had been executed or died in prisons and camps during the Stalinist repressions in 1948–53, scores of established poets and prose writers survived or remained untouched directly by the repression. Many of them were also war veterans.

### III TWENTY YEARS LATER

In 1951, the Knesset selected the 27th day of the month of Nisan as “the Day of (Remembrance of) the Holocaust and the Heroism” [*Yom ha-Shoah ve-ha-Gevurah*]. By placing it in the Jewish calendar, the Israeli decision-makers emphasised the exclusively national character of the Warsaw Jews’ revolt in April 1943. In Poland, as well as in communist and some socialist (most notably, Bundist) circles, anniversaries of the Warsaw ghetto uprising continued to be commemorated not on 27 Nisan but on 19 April, emphasising its place in general modern history.

To all appearances, in 1963, the Soviet press had received an instruction to mark the 20th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Moreover, judging by the *Daily News Bulletin* of the Jewish Telegraphic Agency (23 April 1963), the Moscow synagogue also received a similar instruction – about 1,500 Moscow Jews observed the anniversary. Among those attending was Yosef Tekoah, Israel’s Ambassador to the Soviet Union.<sup>29</sup> (Warsaw Ghetto commemoration events also took place earlier, most notably in Vilnius and Riga in 1961.)<sup>30</sup>

On 18 April 1963, *Izvestiya* carried a long article entitled ‘Ashes Tear at the Heart’, by-lined by someone named A. Panfilov.<sup>31</sup> Significantly, his article did not follow the example of the 1955 *Gudok* description

<sup>27</sup> Smolar, *Oyf der letster pozitsye*, 303.

<sup>28</sup> Владимир Павлов, ‘Мы не забудем’, *Литературная газета* (24 June 1958), 4.

<sup>29</sup> ‘Jews in Moscow Observe Anniversary of Warsaw Ghetto Revolt’, *Jewish Telegraphic Agency: Daily News Bulletin* (23 April 1963), 3.

<sup>30</sup> Joseph Simon Goldstein, ‘A yid tsu a yidn’, *Forverts* (16 June 1961), 4.

<sup>31</sup> А. Панфилов, ‘Пепел стучит в сердце’, *Известия* (18 April 1963), 2.

of the uprising as an act of despair. In fact, it could not be characterised as such because of its claimed communist leadership. “The uprising in the ghetto was not merely an act of despair. The rebels wanted to contribute to the struggle against Hitlerism”. Of course, there was added the obligatory ideological context. First: “The hope of the ghetto prisoners for freedom came true thanks to the heroic exploits of the Soviet Army [historically, it was called Red Army during the war], which smashed the Hitlerite hordes and saved mankind from fascism”. Second: “The people of People’s Poland realise that the past should not be forgotten today. The tragic experience of the war has made them especially sensitive to all manifestations of fascism, which is rearing its head again today in West Germany”.

By that time, Moscow already had a Yiddish periodical. Launched in August 1961, the literary journal *Sovetish Heymland* ended the period of effectively imposing silence on the Yiddish printing, which began in November 1948 when the authorities closed down in Moscow the newspaper *Eynikayt* and the publishing house *Der Emes*.<sup>32</sup> In 1962, Polish Yiddish *literati* were outraged when the new Yiddish journal did not mark the anniversary of the ghetto uprising.<sup>33</sup> In 1963, by contrast, materials devoted to the twentieth anniversary of the uprising filled some fifty pages of the journal’s March-April issue. In 1965, Aron Vergelis, editor of *Sovetish Heymland*, whose relations with the Warsaw colleagues were cold at best, and the Kiev Yiddish novelist Hersh Polyaner, visited Warsaw.<sup>34</sup>

The journal’s editors found it essential to define the role of the ghetto uprising as an episode, even if a momentous one, in the general Soviet-led struggle against Hitlerism. Hersh Remenik, who headed the criticism department of *Sovetish Heymland*, explained this in his article on Soviet Yiddish writings devoted to the Warsaw ghetto uprising:

The Warsaw ghetto uprising has to be seen as an important contribution of the Jewish masses to the international struggle of the progressive sectors

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<sup>32</sup> See, e.g. Gennady Estraiikh, ‘Yiddish Publishing in the Soviet Union’, in Ariel Bar-Levav and Uzi Rebhun (eds), *Textual Transmission in Contemporary Jewish Cultures* (Oxford, 2020), 70–86.

<sup>33</sup> Геннадий Эстрайх, *Еврейская литературная жизнь Москвы, 1917–1991* (Санкт-Петербург, 2015), 287–8.

<sup>34</sup> Bernard Mark, ‘Dziennik’, ed. and transl. by Joanna Nalewajko-Kulikow, *Kwartalnik Historii Żydów*, 2 (2008), 156–92. An English translation of Mark’s diary is forthcoming in *East European Jewish Affairs*.

of all peoples, led by the Soviet Union, against fascism and imperialist reaction. Indeed, in such light, this topic has found creative embodiment in Yiddish Soviet literature.<sup>35</sup>

The March-April 1963 special issue carried a few pieces by Polish Yiddish writers, including an article by Smolar, who stressed the leading role of the communist underground once again. The same trope was central in Peretz Markish's novel *Trot fun doyres* [Footsteps of the Generations], the most monumental Soviet literary treatment of the topic, a fragment of which appeared in the same issue. The novel's manuscript survived, although Markish, like Fefer and a group of other JAFK personalities, was executed in August 1952.

In Markish's portrayal, interwar Poland appears as a dysfunctional capitalist society unable to fight against the Germans effectively. While government ministers were running for their lives, carrying suitcases stuffed with hard currency, only groups of workers led by communists, including political prisoners liberated from the ill-famed Warsaw prison Pawiak, had defended the capital for ten days. Thanks to their heroic resistance, thousands of Poles and Jews had the chance to flee to the Soviet Union.

Although Markish's sympathies always lay on the side of the younger generation, the novel *Footsteps of the Generations* suggests a less black-and-white approach to this problem, perhaps because the setting is not Soviet. Shaye Reyngold, one of the likeable older characters, is a Jewish resident of Warsaw, whose children have rejected his traditional way of life. His elder daughter Frida is a professional revolutionary, incarcerated in Pawiak. His son, Mietek, had studied in Switzerland, but when the civil war broke out in Spain, he joined the Naftali Botwin Company, a Jewish company in the Polish Dąbrowski Battalion of the International Brigades.<sup>36</sup>

Bernard Gross, a novel's protagonist, is a Polish communist, a teacher before the war. He fought with the Germans in the ranks of the Polish Army and then fled eastwards, to the "new world, which at one go took into its hospitable expanse hundreds of thousands

<sup>35</sup> Gennady Estraiikh, 'Anti-Nazi Rebellion in Peretz Markish's Drama and Prose', in Joseph Sherman *et al.* (eds), *A Captive of the Down: The Life and Work of Peretz Markish* (Oxford, 2011), 172–85.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Gerben Zaagsma, "'Red Devils': The Botwin Company in the Spanish Civil War', *East European Jewish Affairs*, xxxiii, 1 (2003), 83–99.

of homeless, fed them with bread, covered them with a roof, and protected them from death". Gross diagnoses the fundamental difference between Soviet and Polish Jews. The former never lose heart, because they are not isolated in society. The Polish Jews, apart from such communists as Frida and Mietek, cannot defend themselves because they still essentially live in medieval times and are confined to themselves.

Markish describes the radical transformation of the group of refugees sent to an industrial centre in the Urals. The group, which includes artisans, white-collar workers, intellectuals, and people without any profession, shows the first signs of a change already on the way from the western borders. Some argue that they will get a new Torah with a new set of commandments in the Ural Mountains: "You shall not trade. You shall not wander. You shall not earn easy money. You shall not build castles in the air". Indeed, the healthy Ural climate and physical work make the refugees stronger. Most importantly, they are ready to fight the Nazis.

In the meantime, the Jews confined in the Warsaw ghetto also begin to understand their mistake of not following the example of those who fled to Russia and that "if Poland is destined to be again Poland, it will happen only thanks to Russia". In his literary canvass of the ghetto, Markish sought to balance Jewish and non-Jewish characters in both categories – positive and negative. The Jewish policeman is as repulsive as the Polish Nazi collaborator. At the same time, Hans Littau, a former student, exemplifies those good Germans who help the Jews. The Judenrat members, on the other hand, are ready to go to any limits in order to save their lives. The theatre and other cultural institutions, which the Germans permitted in the ghetto, are "pieces of cake, baked by the Judenrat people and poisoned by the Germans".<sup>37</sup>

In order to misrepresent the history of the uprising by portraying the communists as the only influential and effective group in the ghetto underground movement, Markish makes Mietek appear in the ghetto as a parachutist sent from Moscow. Ironically, he still wears a beret – the mark of an international brigade officer in Spain. Markish could rely on Ber Mark, who employed the unsubstantiated rumour about a parachuted former international brigade captain in his historical narrative.<sup>38</sup> The officer ostensibly brings the Kremlin's instruction: to

<sup>37</sup> For more on the novel, see Estraiikh, 'Anti-Nazi Rebellion', 172–85.

<sup>38</sup> Ber[nard] Mark, *Der oyfshtand in varshever geto* (Varshe, 1963), 17.

unite under communist leadership all the resistance groups, including the Zionists, who at the time of Markish's writing the novel, were not considered particularly bad, given the fact that the Soviet Union supported the establishment of Israel. Meanwhile, Markish misrepresents the Bundists as a group that disavows resistance and becomes an impediment to unity among the fighters. In his version, the Home Army [Armia Krajowa] refuses to help supply the ghetto fighters with weapons. The only effective support comes from the Polish communist underground.

#### IV 1967 AND LATER

Despite the resistance of some vigilant functionaries who sniffed out nationalism in Markish's novel, it came out in 1966 in Moscow.<sup>39</sup> The book could not appear in a Russian translation because the ideological overseers in the Communist Party's Central Committee showed reluctance toward allowing any substantial publication devoted to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Various excuses would be used to prevent the appearance of monographs written by Ber Mark, whose book *Der ufshtand fun varshever geto* or its later editions under the title *Der oyshtand in varshever geto* never came out in Russian, and by the Soviet historian Valentin Alekseev, whose book *Varshavskoe vosstanie* [The Warsaw Uprising] would see the light of day only in 1997.<sup>40</sup> Insofar as concerns periodicals, Jewish topics were, first, of minor importance, and second, ideologically fraught. The editors became even more cautious after the scandal created by the publication in 1961 of Yevgeny Yevtushenko's poem 'Babi Yar'.<sup>41</sup> Still, events in Poland – a 'fraternal socialist country' – were reported in the press. Thus, a laconic 'universalised' note could be found in *Pravda* on the 25th anniversary of the uprising:

<sup>39</sup> Peretz Markish, *Trot fun doyres* (Moskva, 1966).

<sup>40</sup> Семен Чарный, 'Советский государственный антисемитизм в цензуре начала 60-х годов (на примере судьбы книги Б. Марка "Восстание в Варшавском гетто")', *Вестник Еврейского Университета в Москве*, xv, 2 (1997), 76–81.

<sup>41</sup> Геннадий Эстрайх and Александра Полян, 'Эхо "Бабьего яра". Отклики на стихотворение Евгения Евтушенко, *Архив еврейской истории*, 10 (2018), 196–222.

The public of People's Poland is marking the 25th anniversary of the uprising in the Warsaw ghetto. Today representatives of the central and Warsaw organisations of the National Unity Front [Front Jedności Narodu] and the Union of Fighters for Freedom and Democracy [Związek Bojowników o Wolność i Demokrację] laid a wreath and flowers at the monument to the heroes of the Warsaw ghetto. In connection with this memorable date, a formal meeting was held in the Hall of Congresses of the Palace of Culture and Science.<sup>42</sup>

The contents and tone of Jewish-related publications changed significantly after the June 1967 war in the Middle East and, concomitant to that, the disruption of diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union and Israel. Soviet propagandists felt unleashed to openly advance theories that Zionism was a prime enemy of the Soviet people, that it was rooted in anti-communism and bellicose nationalism, and had a long history of collaboration with various reactionary movements, including Hitler's followers. From time to time, they referred to personalities or events associated with the Warsaw Ghetto. Yevgeny Yevseev, one of the most notorious among the Israel-hating authors, wrote in his article 'Flunky at Their Beck and Call', published on 4 October 1967 in the daily *Komsomolskaya pravda* targeting young readers: "In the years of fascism's heyday the Zionists actively cooperated with the Nazi leaders and were their outright accomplices in several cases".<sup>43</sup> As an example, he referred to the case of Alfred Nossig, a sculptor who, indeed, once was a Zionist activist.<sup>44</sup> The Jewish Combat Organisation accused the septuagenarian of collaborating with the Nazis and executed him in February 1943. Lev Korneev, who belonged to the same anti-Zionist guild as Yevseev, made similar revelations – also about Nossig – in his article 'The Sinister Secrets of Zionism', published in *Ogonёk* in 1977.<sup>45</sup>

Vladimir Bolshakov, another prolific author of anti-Zionist writings, alluded to the Warsaw Ghetto uprising in his 1982 article, 'A Fascist with the Bible', for the Moscow satirical journal *Krokodil*:

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<sup>42</sup> '25-я годовщина восстания в Варшавском гетто', *Правда* (19 April 1968), 4.

<sup>43</sup> Yevgeny Yevseev, 'Flunky at Their Beck and Call', *Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, 590.39 (1967), 14–15.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Shmuel Almog, 'Alfred Nossig: A Reappraisal', *Studies in Zionism*, iv, 1 (1983), 1–29.

<sup>45</sup> Лев Корнеев, 'Зловещие тайны сионизма', *Огонёк*, 35 (1977), 28–30.

Forty years ago, SS-men with shepherd dogs herded Jews to barb-wired Auschwitz. Nowadays, [Menachem] Begin's Sonderkommandos escort, in the same way, detained Palestinians to concentration camps. In the massacre of Sabra and Shatila,<sup>46</sup> one can recognise the style of SS-Brigadeführer Jürgen Stroop, who crushed in blood the Warsaw Ghetto uprising.<sup>47</sup>

The instrumentalisation of the Holocaust, a characteristic feature of the Soviet propaganda, was less pronounced in *Sovetish Heymland*, though it also published writings by – as a rule, less extreme, middle-of-the-road – authors specialising in anti-Zionist writings. The tone was set by Vergelis, who followed the general line of Soviet anti-Zionist propaganda, arguing that: “At the fatal hour Zionism kept aloof, unconcerned for the destiny of the Jewish people as a whole. Zionists came into contact with the Hitlerites at the time when all major public and political trends had united against fascism”.<sup>48</sup> He had developed these ideas in his political pulp prose, including his 1975 novel *Di tsayt* [Time]. The most ‘gripping’ events in the novel occur during and after the war, when Vergelis’s fantasy brings together a Zionist agent, a Russian Nazi collaborationist, and even the most publicised adventurer of Nazi Germany, Otto Skorzeny.<sup>49</sup> At the same time Vergelis, himself a war veteran, wrote ‘normal’ poems on the Jewish tragedy, including the poem ‘The Song of Warsaw Ghetto’. Its Russian translation by Lev Berinsky, a Russian and – later – also Yiddish poet, came out in the February 1978 issue of the Moscow literary monthly *Iunost*.

The Yiddish journal continued publishing material on the uprising, usually in April issues of the journal, combining such material with obligatory sections devoted to Lenin’s birthday (22 April). In 1968, the 25th anniversary of the Ghetto Uprising was marked, in particular, by printing fragments from Ber Mark’s book and the book

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<sup>46</sup> The 1982 mass killing of civilians, mostly Palestinians and Lebanese Shiites, by a pro-Israeli Christian militia, in the Sabra neighbourhood and the adjacent Shatila refugee camp in Beirut, Lebanon.

<sup>47</sup> Владимир Викторович Большаков, ‘Фашист с библией’, *Крокодил*, 33 (1982), 8–9.

<sup>48</sup> Aron Vergelis, *A Traveller’s Encounters: Articles, Speeches, Travel Notes, Interviews and Letters of a Jewish Poet* (Moscow, 1988), transl. from Russian by Boris Lunkov, 39.

<sup>49</sup> For more, see Gennady Estraiikh, ‘An Opportunist Anti-Zionism: *Sovetish Heymland*, 1961–1991’, in *Rebels Against Zion: Studies on the Jewish Left Anti-Zionism*, ed. by August Grabski (Warsaw, 2011), 166.



*Pusta woda* [Empty Water] by Krystyna Żywulska (Zofia Landau), being her memoir of surviving the Auschwitz camp under a false Christian identity.

All in all, while the instrumentalisation of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising was characteristic also of the material that appeared in *Sovetish Heymland*, the dominant agenda differed from that of the Russian-language press, and the scale was different: the uprising was not a minor episode at all. The Yiddish journal continued to put a 'nationalist' emphasis on the heroism of the ghetto fighters, effectively doing what *Eynikayt* was accused of doing in the 1940s. Writing about his impression of visiting the site of the Warsaw Ghetto, Vergelis drew a parallel between the headquarters bunker of the Jewish Combat Organisation and Pavlov's House, a symbol of the Battle of Stalingrad.<sup>50</sup>

## V

### CONCLUSIONS

The 1949 Yiddish language textbook, *College Yiddish* by Uriel Weinreich, contains, among other things, the author's insightful observations about contemporary Jewish life. In one of the texts, we read about the New York press: "An English newspaper writes little about Jews. But in a Yiddish newspaper one can read about Jews living in all countries".<sup>51</sup> Indeed, Jewish-related topics tended to occupy only a marginal place in non-Jewish periodicals. It is no coincidence, for instance, that during the Second World War, even the *New York Times*, with its high proportion of Jewish contributors and readers, did not give much prominence to materials on the Nazi persecution and killing of Jews.<sup>52</sup> The 'division of labour' between the Jewish and non-Jewish press remained characteristic also of the post-war media. In communist Poland, the Yiddish and partly Polish newspaper *Folks-Sztyme/Głos Ludu* [People's Voice] played an important role as an outlet for articles and literary works on the Holocaust. Significantly, from 1956 the Warsaw

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<sup>50</sup> Aron Vergelis, *Rayzes* (Moskve, 1976), 404.

<sup>51</sup> Uriel Weinreich, *College Yiddish: An Introduction to the Yiddish Language and to Jewish Life and Culture* (New York, 1984), 45.

<sup>52</sup> Laurel Leff, 'When the Facts Didn't Speak for Themselves: The Holocaust in the *New York Times*, 1939–1945', *International Journal of Press/Politics*, v, 2 (2000), 52–72.

newspaper was published under the auspices of the Social and Cultural Association of Jews in Poland [Towarzystwo Społeczno-Kulturalne Żydów w Polsce]. Thus, notwithstanding all the ideological restrictions under the communist regime, it was a publication of a Jewish organisation.

In the Soviet Union, on the other hand, the authorities did not allow for the establishment of any Jewish organisations, apart from the strictly controlled local religious bodies, which had no access to the printing press. Even the Anti-Zionist Committee, formed in 1983, was shaped by the Agitprop as an organisation that represented, ostensibly, the ‘Soviet public’ rather than the most ideologically conscientious segment of the Jewish population. As for the journal *Sovetish Heymland*, an organ of the Soviet Writers Union, it boasted of focusing predominantly on contemporary topics rather than ‘digging in the past’. For all that, the Moscow journal did, even if with some qualms, publish essays, memoirs, prose and poetic works devoted to various aspects of the Holocaust. It seems that, taking into account the journal’s narrow readership, the ideological overseers cared little about this.

*proofreading James Hartzell*

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