

## HOLOCAUST MEMORY IN MODERN RUSSIA

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### Abstract

*The main tendencies and features of the Holocaust memory policy in modern Russia are analysed in this article. Positive and negative factors in preserving the memory of the Holocaust are extracted that lie in the context of the memory of the Nazi occupation on USSR territory.*

**Key words:** *policy of memory; denial and understatement of the Holocaust, National Holocaust Remembrance Day; the “Return dignity” project.*

In the West, the subject of the Holocaust is shaped by a collective memory of World War II and an aversion to violence and intolerance. In Russia, by contrast, it is the memory of heroism and victimization in the war that shapes views of the Holocaust. One cannot deny that the Russian population is very well aware of the war between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, which in Russia is called the “Great Patriotic War”. Indeed, the victory over Nazi Germany is much propagandized in Russia.<sup>2</sup>

However, this memory culture of World War II is rather superficial because it leaves out one essential aspect that is intrinsically linked with the war: the Holocaust. As a result, the collective memory of Jewish victims is presented in Russia in a rather fragmented manner. There are both objective and subjective reasons for this. The Nazis and their collaborators in the occupied Soviet territories killed more than seven million civilians. This number appeared in 1998 in volume 4 of the multi-volume history “The Great Patriotic War” prepared by several institutes of the Russian Academy of Science. Another 20 million died in battles as well as at the home front, during the occupation and in the siege of Leningrad.<sup>3</sup> The majority of them were non-Jews. For this and some other reasons, the subject-matter of the Holocaust is still painful in Russia, as in some other post-Soviet states (Belarus and Ukraine).

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<sup>2</sup> See Ilya Altman. Opfer des Hasses. Der Holocaust in UdSSR, 1941-1945. — Gleichen, 2008

<sup>3</sup> Usually these figures are mentioned in general calculations of Soviet human losses during the war, including textbooks. Some politicians ranged them in mass-media at from 13,5 to 20 million “peaceful Soviet citizens”.

Only in recent years has Russian society begun to be interested and started to understand the Holocaust. The term “Holocaust” was included in 2003 at State Pedagogical Standart.<sup>4</sup> Documents about the Holocaust started being published in Russia since early 90-th. The first complete edition of the *Black Book* was published in 1993. In the same 1993, the State Archive of the Russian Federation in conjunction with Yad Vashem issued a collection of documents entitled *The Unknown Black Book*. It included materials, which the editors of the *Black Book* refused to publish fearing censorship. In 2005 it was translated and published in Hungary.<sup>5</sup> Also, this volume was published in English by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.<sup>6</sup> In 2015 the Moscow publishing house Corpus issued a revised text of these publications with our detailed comments.<sup>7</sup>

Unlike previous editions, this book appeared in bookstores in all major Russian cities. This publication caused a public response: reviews, radio programs, interviews. Several presentations took place both in Russia and in other countries.

In recent years, new historical facts were made available about the Jewish refugees and the émigrés, connected with the Soviet Union, and, in particular, about the proposal Germany made to the USSR back in 1940 to admit “all Reich Jews”, which the Soviet government rejected.

The information about the transport of several thousand refugees from Lithuania via the USSR to Japan in late 1940 and early 1941 became of great interest. As it is known, the Japanese Consul in Kaunas, Chiune Sugihara, gave visas to refugees. But it was only recently when we learned from declassified documents from the Archives of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation about the role played by the Soviet authorities in this episode and the problems the refugees faced while entering Japan.<sup>8</sup>

The last decade has seen several new trends in Holocaust studies in Russia.<sup>9</sup> First, there are more scholarly works and more memoirs published. Some of them have been published in the Russian provinces, including in cities that were not occupied by the Germans.

In recent years, Jewish communities in Orel and Rostov-on-Don, and local researchers in Taganrog, Pyatigorsk, Nevel and Pskov have become involved in preparing books and articles on the Holocaust. These works are largely descriptive rather than analytical. Also works by Professor Boris Kovalev from the University of Novgorod dealing with collaboration appeared noteworthy as well as research on anti-Jewish propaganda in the German-controlled press, theatre and radio in the

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<sup>4</sup> Ilya Altman. Holocaust Education in Russia Today: Its Challenges and Achievements. In *The Holocaust and the United Nation Outreach Programme. Discussion Papers Journal*. V.II –New York, 2020. P.117-130

<sup>5</sup> Az Ismeretlen FEKETE KÖNYV. Budapest, Pannonica Kiadó, 2005.; Ilya Altman. The Holocaust in the Territory of Russian Federation. In: *Facing the Nazi Genocide: Non-Jews and Jews in Europe.*/ Eds. Beate Kosmala and Feliks Tych. Berlin, Metropol, 2004. - P.169-203

<sup>6</sup> Ilya Altman, Joshua Rubinstein(eds.). *The Unknown Black Book*. Chicago: Indiana University Press, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> *Черная книга*. Под редакцией Василия Гроссмана и Ильи Эренбурга. – М.: АСТ: CORPUS, 2015; «Неизвестная Черная книга». Материалы к «Черной книге» под редакцией Василия Гроссмана и Ильи Эренбурга. / Сост. И.А. Альтман – М.: АСТ: CORPUS, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Ilya Altman. The issuance of visas to War Refugees by Chiane Sugichara as Reflected in the documents stored in Russian archives. In “Casablanca of The North: Refugees and Rescuers in Kaunas 1939–1940”. – Kaunas: Versus Aureus, 2017. P. 133-139.

<sup>9</sup> See more Ilya Altman. The Holocaust on the Territory of Russian Federation. In: *Facing the Nazi Genocide: Non-Jews and Jews in Europe*. Beate Kosmala and Feliks Tych, Eds. Berlin, Metropol, 2004. - P.169-203

occupied areas. We can also mention in this regard recent works by Dmitry Zhukov and Ivan Kovtun.<sup>10</sup>

Second, these are works by foreign researchers not translated into Russian. In contrast to Ukraine, Latvia and Lithuania, few readers in Russia are aware of works by some of the most prominent Holocaust researchers writing in English and not translated into Russian (for example, Raul Hilberg, Michael Berenbaum etc). In 2005, one of the most prestigious Russian publishers ROSSPEN issued the book *Encyclopaedia of the Holocaust* edited by Walter Laqueur (originally published by Yale University Press in 2001), but this has proven to be the exception rather than the rule.

In 2009 ROSSPEN published the *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust on the Territory of the Soviet Union*. This was the biggest project of the Russian Holocaust Centre. It brought together almost 100 scholars from fifteen Russian universities to write more than 2,000 articles on specific localities. There are also more than 300 thematic articles dealing with literature, poetry, theatre, cinema, etc. All of them have to do with the Holocaust of Soviet Jews or the fate of the citizens of other countries (victims and perpetrators) on Soviet territory. Many of these articles are entirely original contributions, because at the time when they appeared, nothing else had been written on these topics.

The *Encyclopaedia* summarizes Holocaust research of Russian scholars and their colleagues in the post-Soviet states. It was particularly important for general Holocaust statistics to establish the number of Holocaust victims on Soviet territory. Thanks to the studies of Russian scholars (Mark Kupovetsky and myself) and Israeli scholar (Yitzhak Arad), it was ascertained that the minimum of 2,600,000 Jews were killed on the territory of the former Soviet Union or deported to death camps between 1941 and 1945. Another 300,000 Jews were deported from Germany, German allies and German-occupied Europe to this region and then murdered. These numbers make up nearly 50 per cent of the total number of killed Jews during the Second World War.

Another important point. About 1,000 ghettos and camps were set up on occupied Soviet territory, a higher number than in any other country occupied by the Nazis and their allies.

These numbers were determined through the comprehensive analysis of German and official Soviet data about the number of victims. These statistics are also important in order to assess the number of Holocaust victims in Poland, Romania and Lithuania. Many works by Israeli and Western historians overlook the fact that by June 1941, Jews who had previously lived in eastern Poland, Bukovina and Bessarabia already had Soviet citizenship.

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<sup>10</sup> Илья Алтман. А холокаустт историографияја ес емлекенек мегорзесе Оросзорхзагбан /Альтман И.А. Историография Холокоста и сохранение памяти о нем в России. В кн.: Az antiszemitizmus történeti formái a cári birodalomban és a Szovjetunió területein (Szerk.: Barta Tamás és Krausz Tamás).// Istoricheskie formi antisemitizma v carskoj imperii i na territorii SSSR. Kafedra Rusistiki Universiteta Etvesa Loranda, Russica Pannonica. Budapest, 2014. P. 298-315; Илья Алтман. Der Stellenwert des Holocaust im historischen Gedächtnis Russlands (Место Холокоста в российской исторической памяти) . //Andreas Wirshing, Urgan Zarusky, Alexander Tchubarjan, Viktor Isctshenko (Hrsg.) "Erinnerung an Diktatur und Krieg. Brennpunkte des kulturellen Gedächtnisses zwischen Russland und Deutschland seit 1945" — Олденбург: Де Гройтер, 2015. S. 213-225

The (partial) opening of Soviet archives, and the work done by Russian and foreign researchers made it possible to prove that the total annihilation of Jews (including children, women and old men, the eradication of entire communities) began on the territory of the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941.

Thus, the USSR was consistent and persistent in granting a possibility to several thousand Jews to leave the territory of the Soviet Union, while, at the same time, refusing to admit Jewish emigration from Nazi Germany. So, this help to the Jewish refugees was local and this partial, by allowing them to exist on Soviet territory, but not to enter it. The Soviet government (along with the Western democracies) bears full responsibility for its indifference after the beginning of WW II regarding the fate of the Jews of Germany and countries occupied by the Nazis.<sup>11</sup>

Memorialization of the Holocaust on Russian territory was impacted by the total annihilation of Jewish communities, on the one hand, and a relatively high number of Jews conscripted into the army who returned home and were often the first to launch memorialization, on the other. The support of local authorities made it possible for Jewish religious organizations to obtain recognition in memorializing the Holocaust.

Holocaust remembrance is rarely a feature of the Russian public discourse. Hushing up the Jewish tragedy for almost fifty years had an impact on Russian society, its educational structures, historical institutions and intellectual environment. This reactionary and revisionist impact is stronger than elsewhere in the post-Soviet European space. It is a wonder that Russia still has no Holocaust Remembrance Day, although it was the Red Army that liberated Auschwitz.

Indeed, far from memorializing the Jewish tragedy, government officials in Rostov decided to take down a memorial plaque that was erected in 2004 identifying most of the 27,000 Zmievskaia Balka victims as Jews. The replacement plaque does not mention Jews, but rather “peaceful citizens of Rostov-on-Don and Soviet prisoners of war.” One of the major, although not the most important, motives behind this decision was the reluctance to mention the term “Holocaust” on the plaque, while Jews here were not “gassed” but “shot”.<sup>12</sup>

Since 2015 the Government of Moscow, the Russian Jewish Congress and the Russian Holocaust Centre have annually organized the Week of Remembrance. This is a series of memorial and educational events marked the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz and the International Holocaust Remembrance Day. The highlight of this series of cultural and educational events is the evening requiem held in the prestigious halls of Moscow. Guests of these events included representatives from the political, social and religious sphere, ambassadors and diplomats from more than 25 countries as well as WWII-veterans and former ghetto prisoners, teachers and students. The official part included welcoming speeches by Russian Federation government representatives. The Week of Remembrance is widely covered by the media.

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<sup>11</sup> Il'ya Al'tman. The Holocaust in the Occupied USSR and its Memorialization in Contemporary Russia. In Alex Kay and David Stahel (Eds.). *Mass Violence in Nazi-Occupied Europe*, Indiana University Press, 2018. –P. 219-234

<sup>12</sup> Ilya Altman. Is Minimizing the Scale of the Holocaust a Form of Anti-Semitism in Russia and the World? In “Protecting the Future. Proceedings of the First International Conference on Combating Anti-Semitism. Moscow, November 1-2, 2016”. – New York, 2018 – P. 155-163

Some aspects of the Holocaust have become relevant in the political discourse. The Holocaust took its place in the struggle of the Russian state against the “rehabilitation of Nazism”. The topic of the Holocaust appeared in the official state educational programs, for example, for the first time the International Holocaust Remembrance Day was integrated into the calendar for educational institutions’ measures. By 2020, the number of regions and cities that officially commemorated the International Holocaust Remembrance Day throughout Russia had risen to 656 and included 81 out of 85 Russian regions.

Moreover, a program for perpetuating the Holocaust victims began in the framework of the project “Return Dignity”. After 10 years of preparatory work, it resulted in the installation of about 100 monuments at spots of mass murder of Jews in about 20 Russian regions.

In 2015, the International Forum “Holocaust: 70 Years Later” was held. Different problems of the Holocaust, genocides and terror were discussed in the context of historical memory. This gave a basis for the creation in 2016 of the first International Educational and Research Center of the Holocaust and Genocides at the Russian State University for the Humanities. In 2020, the first master program on Holocaust and Genocide research in Russia was founded at this University.

The Liberators project plays an important role in preserving the memory of the Holocaust in Russia. The Holocaust Center started this project in 2015. Its ultimate goal is to establish the names and biographies of approximately twenty-five thousand soldiers, officers, doctors, journalists. Those who liberated the Auschwitz death camp on January 27, 1945, treated prisoners, or recorded the release or crimes of the Nazis in the media in real time. It was January 27 the date that the UN General Assembly chose as the International Day of Remembrance for the Victims of the Holocaust. But the history of the rescue of prisoners by the Red Army, not only in Auschwitz, but also during the liberation of ghettos and concentration camps in many countries, has not been specially studied.

There were about 7,000 inmates in Auschwitz itself and its branches at the time of liberation, in which number approximately 300 were Jews. No museum in the world has made a list of either the liberators or the liberated victims of the Holocaust.

Five divisions of the 1st Ukrainian Front took part in the liberation. In recent years, during the information wars between Russia, Poland and Ukraine, the question has repeatedly arisen whether the liberators were predominantly Ukrainian or Russian. Our intention is to find out the biographies of all liberators as well as the specific names of the prisoners they saved. Wherein the task is to trace the personal fates of the liberators and those liberated before and after January 27, 1945: where they came from, where they were located, what was their job after the war, and of what nationality they were. The most important part of the project is to find the documents and photographs from their family archives. This will allow us not only to preserve the personal destinies of the liberators and the liberated, but it will also help young people, schoolchildren and students, who became the main performers of the project, to get acquainted with the original documents that were preserved in the families of the liberators - letters, diaries, memoirs, interviews in newspapers.

Under the leadership of the Holocaust Center, the search is being conducted in more than 25 regions of Russia. The results found are presented at events in educational institutions for the International Holocaust Day. Project participants study existing publications, specialized Internet sites, and also they work in local museums, make inquiries to archives. Schoolchildren meet with former prisoners – I record their testimonies of the facts of release.

The project began with the training of its leaders. We have held about 20 seminars for teachers in the regions, several conferences for schoolchildren. With the support of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation, we have prepared guidelines for the participants and project leaders. The documents, photographs, and memoirs found during the search were sent to the archives of the Holocaust Center. Based on the results of the search, research papers are being prepared for the International Competition “Memory of the Holocaust - the Path to Tolerance”.

From the very beginning, we decided that the traveling historical and documentary exhibition “The Holocaust: Annihilation, Liberation, Rescue”, dedicated to the role of the Red Army in saving the peoples of Europe from Nazism and the Jewish people from complete annihilation, would become a kind of “business card of the project”.<sup>13</sup>

A number of unique exhibits are presented at the exhibition among more than 80 documents and photos from archives and museums of several countries. Among them - a letter from the famous Italian writer Primo Levi about his release from Auschwitz, documents about the rescue of the leaders of the Jewish community in Germany.

As is well known, the world famous diary of Anne Frank was published in 1947 by her father. It is difficult to overestimate the contribution of Otto Frank to the fate of this unique document. But few people knew that Soviet doctors treated him for six months. Our exhibition contains an invaluable document: his first letter after he was able to hold a pen in his hands. It is written on a German Auschwitz letterhead, addressed to his mother in Basel, dated 23 February 1945. The first phrase of the letter: “I was saved and cured by Russians”. The question that follows is the following: did he know about the meaning of February 23rd for the Soviet Union? In the diary of Otto Frank, which he kept immediately after his release, you can find an entry: February 23 - the day of the Red Army. The exhibition in Russian was shown in the State Duma of the Russian Federation (2016) and the Federation Council of the Russian Federation (2018). It was also exhibited at the Moscow City Hall (2019) and in 20 regions of the Russian Federation (in city halls, museums, universities, regional (regional) libraries). No other exhibition about the Holocaust, including those prepared by our foreign colleagues - the Anne Frank Museum (the Netherlands), Yad Vashem, the Swedish project Living History and others – has been exhibited in Russia at the same mass scale.

We consider the display of our exhibition abroad as a case of “people's diplomacy”. Versions in 9 foreign languages (English, German, Spanish, French, Hebrew, Czech, Slovak, Polish, Hungarian) have been created. We managed to show it in 4 headquarters of international organizations (UN,

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<sup>13</sup> Ilya Altman. Introduction. The Holocaust: Annihilation, Liberation, Rescue. Booklet of the documentary exhibition. – Moscow, 2017, P.1-2

UNESCO, Council of Europe) and parliaments of 6 countries (Czech Republic, Israel, Argentina, Uruguay, Austria, Slovakia), as well as in the Berlin Senate. At the UN, the exhibition was opened by the Russian Foreign Minister, and the UN Secretary General visited it. All presentations were attended by heads of parliaments and ambassadors of our country. These events drew a great response in the media: several hundred publications, some published by the world's leading agencies (Associated Press) and publications in more than 30 countries.

The partnership with museums and Holocaust research centers in different countries plays a significant role in our project, for example the preparation and display of the exhibition in Budapest in cooperation with the Hungarian Holocaust Memorial. Our partners not only translated the text of the exhibition, but also supplemented it with 4 stands and several showcases with exhibits about the Holocaust in Hungary.

We have recently created a specialized website – The Liberators. It contains the guidelines for organizing the project and, most importantly, more than 500 names and destinies, personal stories, photographs of the main characters of the liberation and rescue of prisoners are also included. Biographies of several thousand liberators and prisoners have already been found, they are now being processed by the staff of the center and our partners.

We see the prospects of the project in assigning their names to the streets in the cities where the divisions liberated from Auschwitz were formed (note that there is such a street in Arkhangelsk) and memorial plaques on the houses where their commanders lived.

In 2020, more than 150,000 schoolchildren and teachers took part in the memorial and educational events dedicated to January 27. The project makes it possible to link the International Day of Remembrance for the Victims of the Holocaust with the regional history – a contribution to the rescue of residents of a certain settlement, region or republic. A personal approach to history is fundamental to the Holocaust Center. We are convinced that only through personal stories, the stories of a particular family, one can understand the whole tragedy of the war, the Nazi occupation regime, the Holocaust, the victories and defeats, heroism and betrayal, personal responsibility to future generations. The methodology for establishing the personality of the liberators may become the basis for such projects, dedicated to the liberation of other camps and ghettos. In my opinion, this is a model of educational projects both in Russia and in other countries, the armies of which liberated the Holocaust victims, and where the Allies liberated the inmates of ghettos and concentration camps – in Budapest, Terezin, Lodz, Buchenwald, Dachau, Mauthausen.

I would also like to raise one more issue: the topic of Jewish victims isn't always reflected and sometimes hushed up in the Russian media when covering memorial events at the International Day of Remembrance for the Victims of the Holocaust. On the one hand, the headlines contain the term "Holocaust", but the emphasis is often placed on all victims of Nazi crimes. The role of the allies is

rarely mentioned. Meanwhile, the liberation of the camps and ghettos is one of the most important events of the Second World War, our memory of the joint victory over Nazism.<sup>14</sup>

To sum up, Holocaust researchers in Russia face numerous problems. Many collections of documents from departmental archives (the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, special services, the Presidential Archives) are only partially available to historians. As noted above, Russian academics often overlook the Holocaust, including works that concern Nazi ideology, policy and practice. Furthermore, in cases where the destruction of the Jews is mentioned, the number of victims is considerably diminished. This was the case, for example, of a book published in 2010 and edited by one of the most well-known Russian historians of the Second World War, Oleg Rzheshovski. He spoke of about 700,000 Jewish victims on the territory of the USSR.

The national Holocaust Remembrance Day still does not exist in Russia despite all the attempts of the Russian Holocaust Center and Jewish organizations to implement it based on the fact that Russia has ratified the United Nations General Assembly resolution 60/7 on 1 November 2005 about commemorating the tragedy of the Holocaust.

Unfortunately, Russia is not an IHRA (International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance) member. The Russian Holocaust Center's international cooperation network is an essential component of the connections forged by this organization with Russia. Further international cooperation in studying, teaching and memorializing the Holocaust is definitely needed.

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<sup>14</sup> See Liberation of Nazi Concentration Camps (1944-1945) // Proceedings from the Tenth International Conference "Holocaust Lessons and Contemporary Russia". Compiled by Ilya Altman, Maria Gileva and Svetlana Tikhankina. Ilya Altman (eds). Moscow: MIC, 2020 (In Russian).



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*Неизвестная Черная книга. Материалы к «Черной книге» под редакцией Василия Гроссмана и Ильи Эренбурга.*, Сост. И.А. Альтман – М.: АСТ: CORPUS, 2015 [Neizvestnaya Chernaya kniga. Materialy k «Chernoy knige» pod redaktsiey Vasilija Grossmana i Ilyi Erenburga., Sost. I.A. Alytman – М.: АСТ: CORPUS, 2015].