First Filmmakers of the Holocaust: Soviet Cinema and the Genocide of the Jews, 1938–1946 by Jeremy Hicks (review)

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of European Judaism” (136). It is up to musicologists to deliver a more precise analysis of how Bildung is manifest in this music.

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First Filmmakers of the Holocaust: Soviet Cinema and the Genocide of the Jews, 1938–1946

Jeremy Hicks, a British scholar of Russian film, has written a ground-breaking book. He opens by pointing out our “extraordinary ignorance about the first moving images to depict the Holocaust” which are found in Soviet wartime films. He argues that these neglected images, if contextualized and supplemented with archival research, can become a powerful historical source—a cinematic Black Book. Despite the Soviets’ attempts to silence the Holocaust, they nevertheless created “a visual record and an initial effort, albeit one deeply flawed and sometimes reluctant, to grasp and reconstruct events of the Holocaust.”

Already in his introduction, Hicks suggests a useful contrast between the Soviet methods and an approach of Claude Lanzmann. Where Lanzmann relied on testimony to foreground the lacunae in our memory and understanding of the Holocaust, the Soviets intentionally “cover up and repress.” Hicks’s task as a researcher is to “locate and begin to scrutinize these blank and blanked-out spots” in Soviet film. This is why his analysis focuses, by necessity, on gaps, ellipses, and silences.

It might surprise western readers that the USSR played any role in documenting the Holocaust. But it is Soviet features films of the late 1930s that first exposed Nazi antisemitism on silver screens worldwide. Hicks analyzes one such film, Professor Mamlock (I wrote about other films, in The Phantom Holocaust: Soviet Cinema and Jewish Catastrophe). Release of these films at home and abroad coincided with the Nazi pogroms, making them uncannily timely.

Professor Mamlock offers a limited perspective on both Jewish identity and German Nazism: its true heroes are not Jews but communists, with the real conflict not between Jews and Nazis, but rather between communists and Nazis. Progressive Jewish characters join communists at factories and in the underground, and convert to communism. Yet, the ugly scowl of Nazi antisemitism is still evident.
After the Molotov-Ribentropp Pact was signed in August 1939, the Soviet policy toward Nazi Germany underwent a complete change. All Soviet antifascist movies were removed from screens, including *Professor Mamlock*. But in the short time span between their releases and the Pact, these films educated Soviet Jews about Nazi policies. There is evidence to suggest that at least some Soviet Jewish families owe their lives to these films, which taught them not to trust Soviet propaganda and prodded them to escape to safety.

After Germany attacked the Soviet Union in 1941, Stalin welcomed every effort for the war. At that time, even Jewish institutions, such as the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (JAFC), were allowed to contribute. JAFC emphasized the particular position of Jewish people as targets of Nazi violence, as evident in the 1941 newsreel, depicting fiery speeches by Soviet Jewish public figures at the rally against Nazism. Of course, the speeches on screen were heavily edited to downplay the totality of the Nazi plans to destroy the Jewish people.

Other Soviet wartime newsreels and documentaries depicting Nazi crimes on Soviet territories obfuscated the fact that most murdered victims were Jews. The erasure of the Jewish identities of the murdered is particularly glaring in the depictions of mass killings in Sothern Russia and Ukraine. Hicks’s archival findings demonstrate just how much effort went into this obfuscation: outtakes preserved in the Soviet archives show armbands and Jewish stars on the victims, clearly identifying them as Jews.

Other documentaries avoided the subject altogether. The Oscar-winning *Moscow Strikes Back* represents human losses as “Soviet,” but implies Russian national victimhood. Similarly, the wartime documentaries of the famous filmmaker Aleksandr Dovzhenko emphasized the Ukrainian identity of the victims, with no mention of the Jewish genocide. Even in Soviet documentaries depicting liberation of the Majdanek and Auschwitz death camps, there is no explicit mention of the fact that most victims were Jewish. Hicks calls this the “Sovietization” of the Holocaust.

Feature films made during the war present a similar picture: Jews, even if marginally present in the original screenplays, have been systematically written out of the cinematic story of the war. Given this context, it is particularly striking when a film dared to speak to the Jewish fate. *The first such film was* a propaganda short, *A Priceless Head* (1942), featuring the nameless character of a Polish Jew. But the most significant film was a family drama, *The Unwaguated* (1945), which specifically dealt with Jewish characters: Dr. Fishman (played by a Soviet-Yiddish actor) was executed in the ravine,
and his young granddaughter was saved by a sympathetic local family. The central scene depicts a mass execution of Jews, which was filmed in Babyi Yar in Kiev, a place which came to symbolize the Holocaust in the Soviet Union. Its representation was not historically accurate, but it was powerful cinematically. Alas, these films were exceptions, not the rule.

In the postwar era, as Stalin became more antisemitic, The Unvanquished disappeared from screens. The Black Book, a collection memorializing the Holocaust on Soviet soil, was destroyed. Many Jewish public figures were arrested or killed. During that era, Jews had no place on Soviet screens. Not a single feature film attempted to represent or memorialize the Holocaust. As for documentaries, The Judgment of the Nations (1946), which reported on the Nuremberg trial, silenced the Holocaust almost entirely. Still, it did mention—however obliquely—Nazi persecutions of Jews.

Why were these Soviet films unknown or forgotten in the West? Hicks discusses this fascinating question. The problem was that atrocity reports from the Soviet Union were seen with suspicion. The distrust of communist propaganda was compounded by domestic antisemitism both in the US and in the UK. The result was that Soviet Jewish victims of the Holocaust became invisible not only in the Soviet Union, but also in the West. Hicks’s book is an important step in the process of repairing this historic injustice.

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HOPE: A TRAGEDY

On a basic level, Hope: A Tragedy centers on a relatively simple plot: Solomon Kugel, a kind of Jewish everyman, a “begin-againer, starterer-anew” (21), his wife, Bree, and son, Jonah, move to an older farmhouse in upstate New York in an attempt to start over. They choose the small farming town of Stockton, precisely because it is a place that “was famous for nothing,” and the village takes pride in the fact of its “non-history,” using it as a selling point to attract urban families like the Kugels who want to escape the burden of the past (12). And yet, as Kugel soon discovers, the past is inescapable, particularly, the novel seems to argue, for Jews.

At a deeper level then, Auslander’s first novel is a darkly humorous meditation on life, death, and the (de)merits of suffering; on the relative values of pessimism, optimism, and reason; and ultimately, on the weight