

***First Films of the Holocaust: Soviet Cinema and the Genocide of the Jews, 1938–1946*, Jeremy Hicks (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012), iii + 300 pp., pbk. \$28.95.**

***The Phantom Holocaust: Soviet Cinema and Jewish Catastrophe*, Olga Gershenson (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2013), ii + 276 pp., pbk. \$29.25, electronic version available.**

Two new studies challenge received opinions about how the Soviet Union represented the persecution and mass murder of the Jews before, during, and after the “Great Patriotic War.” Many standard histories of World War II and its aftermath in the USSR—Alexander Werth’s classic *Russia at War* (1964), Amir Weiner’s *Making Sense of War* (2001), and Yitzhak Arad’s recent *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union* (2009) are representative examples—underscore the ambivalence, indeed, the outright hostility, of Soviet authorities toward singling out Jews as the Nazis’ particular targets. Candid reports or allusions to the slaughter did appear initially in official pronouncements and major news outlets, but they soon became infrequent and increasingly vague; Jewish victims were routinely described only as “peaceful Soviet citizens,” their ethnic identities suppressed. Accounts of the Nazis’ killing of Jews were relegated to small-circulation Yiddish newspapers such as *Einikayt*, sponsored by the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee.

The reasons for this suppression of terrible truths were complex. The Communists were, ostensibly, ideologically opposed to differentiating among civilian victims of different national groups, even as they ranked these groups according to their alleged contributions to the defense against the German onslaught.<sup>1</sup> Given the extent of civilian deaths, they also feared alienating other ethnic communities. One also must not discount, of course, the antisemitism of Stalin and his coterie. When the tide of war turned in the Allies’ favor, Soviet policies hardened. The regime became intent on constructing a bizarre, obfuscating master narrative about the war as a tragedy with an ultimately happy end: through superhuman efforts galvanized by their genius leader, Stalin, the diverse Soviet peoples had united to protect the socialist fatherland against the global fascist menace—and had triumphed. This forcefully imposed and carefully policed discursive framework could not accommodate—indeed, it seemed in direct competition with—the unmitigated tragedy of Soviet Jewry. Despite intermittent periods of cultural thaw, these policies made commemorating the Holocaust a taboo topic for almost the entire postwar history of the Soviet Union.

The exceptionally well-researched, detailed volumes under review both contest and augment the brief summary just offered of Soviet attitudes toward the Holocaust. Their focus is original. They write about the many *films* about Nazi atrocities against Jews and others produced by the Soviets from the mid-1930s onwards. This is a vital area of Soviet cultural production that the standard histories tend to overlook.<sup>2</sup> Jeremy Hicks focuses primarily on Soviet newsreel and propaganda documentaries, though

he also considers in depth key feature films such as Herbert Rappoport and Adolf Minkin's 1938 drama, *Professor Mamlock*, and Mark Donskoi's 1945 *Nepokorenniye* (*The Unvanquished* [known in the United States as *The Taras Family*]). Olga Gershenson concentrates on fictional films, including *Mamlock* and *The Unvanquished*, that portray the Nazi war against the Jews, but she also discusses non-fictional compilation films such as Mikhail Romm's *Ordinary Fascism* (1965). Hicks investigates the relatively brief period between the mid-1930s and the immediate postwar years with exceptional density of detail and clarity. The scope of Gershenson's excellent volume is far broader—from the half decade before the war through the post-Stalin "Thaw" in the mid-1950s and the demise of Communism in the late 1980s to twenty-first-century, post-Soviet Russia. There is, in fact, surprisingly little overlap in their coverage; their books provide neatly complementary perspectives on what is clearly a much larger and more significant cinematic corpus than Western scholars of Soviet films, at least, have taken note of heretofore.

Even the most important surveys of Holocaust and Soviet cinemas omit most of the films Hicks and Gershenson have uncovered. For example, in her pioneering *Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust*, first published in 1983 and updated in 2003, Annette Insdorf devotes barely a page to summarizing the plot of *Professor Mamlock*. She describes it as possibly "the first film made about the Holocaust," but does not consider how it came to be made and distributed.<sup>3</sup> Ilan Avisar also briefly alludes to *Mamlock*, then discusses no other Soviet films in his *Screening the Holocaust: Cinema's Images of the Unimaginable* (1988). And to round out this brief survey, the titles of Soviet films touching on the Holocaust are barely mentioned in major English-language histories of Soviet wartime and postwar cinema such as Jay Leyda's *Kino* (1960), Peter Kenez's *Cinema and Soviet Society* (2001), or Denise Youngblood's *Russian War Films: On the Cinema Front* (2010).

In part this oversight is due to the fact that almost all the films Hicks and Gershenson have unearthed have languished on archival shelves out of public view for decades, either because they were withdrawn after receiving only limited theatrical distribution during their initial release, or because they were banned from circulation by the Soviet regime for alleged ideological flaws. The effort to locate these films (and, equally important, unused outtakes) at the Russian Documentary Film Archive in Krasnogorsk or at Gosfilmofond in Belye Stolby required patient and often expensive sleuthing. The documents (script versions, censorship records, administrative memos, etc.) they discovered in Lithuanian or Moscow archives to buttress their critical assessments have also been difficult to find; Gershenson was particularly energetic in obtaining many texts from the filmmakers themselves, and conducted personal interviews whenever possible. Both authors provide thoughtful comments on the themes Soviet filmmakers explored, how they conceived the films, and how they were received—or all too often, suppressed. As a result of their research, we are now in a much better position to chart the progress of Soviet-produced Holocaust films as they made their way over

many decades through the multi-layered, often ideologically hostile Soviet cultural bureaucracy. These are no small achievements; what these scholars have produced will serve as a foundation for all further research and reflection on the topic.

Soviet authorities were extraordinarily cautious about disclosing candid reports about the Holocaust in newspapers. It is therefore rather surprising to learn that they ever supported the documentation or dramatization of Jewish wartime suffering in film. Cinema was perhaps the most closely monitored of all the arts, as Communist censors were perennially wary of the reach and power of mass media. Yet, as Hicks and Gershenson establish in compelling detail, during the war and over the course of the following decades, Soviet filmmakers (several of them of Jewish origin), did try to make known the facts about the wartime fate of the Jews. They sometimes succeeded, at least to a limited extent, despite persistent official efforts to block their initiatives.

Consider the case of *Professor Mamlock*, which, Gershenson reminds us, was not the first or the only Soviet film to attempt to dramatize German antisemitism in the 1930s. The titular character, an assimilated doctor of Jewish origin, is mocked as “Itsik” by a former colleague and later paraded through the streets, his white lab coat smeared with the word “*Jude*.” Yet, despite such scenes, Gershenson remarks that the cinematic adaptation of Friedrich Wolf’s play deliberately transformed Mamlock into a figure with “absolutely no Jewish characterization. . . . He is Jewish in name only.” Indeed, Mamlock becomes progressively deracinated until, at the end of the film, he is murdered by storm troopers. Significantly, his death comes shortly after he acknowledges that his apolitical stance had been foolish and that the Communist resistance offers the only hope. The climactic scene decisively shifts the dramatic center of gravity away from Jewish suffering to the crucial political message that all right-thinking individuals must identify with the larger Soviet cause.

Was *Mamlock*, then, really a *Holocaust* film? Hicks and Gershenson evidently think so. But was the plight of German (and Austrian and Czech) Jewry the Soviets’ real concern? The attenuation of Mamlock’s Jewish identity and the unsubtle message to support Communist-led resistance instead suggest that Mamlock was merely a cynical vehicle through which the Soviets attempted to sway Western public opinion. That *Mamlock* as well as two other anti-fascist films released in 1938 and 1939 were mere political statements is seemingly confirmed by the fact that they were first withdrawn, then banned, from Soviet screens even before the Hitler-Stalin pact of August 1939. Only after “Operation Barbarossa” in June 1941 would Jewish persecution be reestablished as a tactically useful topic for the regime.

Hicks concludes his account of the picture by noting that “Jewish persecution by the Nazis was never again to be represented in Soviet film as prominently as it had been in *Professor Mamlock*.” This casts a cloud over the sincerity of Soviet presentations of Jewish persecution in most of the other films he discusses. He is often forced to resort to very elaborate and ingenious contextualizing to isolate some very limited evidence of the death of Jews portrayed on screen. He finds some of his most

problematic examples in the Soviet newsreels chronicling the atrocities the Germans committed. A pattern of indirection and obfuscation can already be seen at work in an August 30, 1941 *Soiuzkinozhurnal* newsreel sounding the alarm about German Einsatzgruppen actions against Soviet Jews. Although the short presents excerpts from speeches by Ilya Ehrenburg and Solomon Mikhoels, who speak of the dangers threatening Jews, the newsreel editors cut out their more agonized comments and emphasized instead the common fate of Russians and Jews. This perspective animated virtually all future newsreels. A December 23, 1941 *Soiuzkinozhurnal* newsreel, which covered the Red Army's re-conquest of Rostov, reported on civilians murdered. Hicks notes that though the victims included some one hundred Jews, the newsreel did not "even imply, let alone state, that the dead included Jews." In his assessment of this and other newsreels, Hicks repeatedly underscores the ways in which attention is deferred from the fate of Jewish victims. Occasionally, the film's narrator does mention a Jewish-sounding surname; in a January 30, 1942 *Soiuzkinozhurnal*, an armband with the word "Jude" can be seen. The films neither contextualized these brief allusions to Jewish victims by reference to the Nazis' insane racial theories, nor did they dwell on them. The February 6, 1942 *Soiuzkinozhurnal*, which featured the discovery of the Bagerov Trench near Kerch, where Jews were the majority of the 7,000 victims shot, is instructive for its studied evasions of facts. Other known photographs of the same location by Evgenii Khaldei provided some of the victims' typically Jewish names—Berman, Rappoport—but the film does not.<sup>4</sup> And Hicks himself offers proof of this obfuscation by providing illustrations from outtakes proving that the editors eliminated any traces of the Star of David armbands the victims had worn.

Similar kinds of procedures are at work in the fictional films Soviet directors made during the war. Hicks notes that most "mentions and unambiguous images of the Nazis' persecution specifically of Jews were removed, usually at or before the script stage." Pyriev's *Secretary of the Regional Party Committee* (1942), the first to portray the German invasion, is a good example. Based on a play by Jewish author Iosif Prut, the film eliminates key references in the script to the sole Jewish character, Rotman. Contemporary Soviet viewers, let alone those who watch this film as well as the newsreels and later documentaries today, would be hard pressed to discern in most of them any serious or candid engagement with *Jewish* mass death.<sup>5</sup> This means that there is perhaps a smaller Soviet Holocaust film legacy than Hicks suggests. He shows, however, that there were also, despite the odds, a few works more candid about Jews as special Nazi targets for extermination. Boris Barnet's short *The Priceless Head* (1942) and Donskoi's *The Unvanquished* are perhaps the most significant; both are arguably important additions to the canon of Holocaust films.

Gershenson's careful detective work following film scripts through the censorship stages and into production both during the war and after locates many instances when censors eliminated all traces of the murdered Jews. The military drama, *Two*

*Fighters* (Leonid Lukov, 1942), “never spells out that Arkadii [the lead character] is Jewish. . . . [His] character underwent ‘visual de-ethnicization’ and does not look stereotypically Jewish: he is blond, athletic and daringly brave.” At most, she writes, “his Jewishness might be described as contextual or situational—open to both Jewish and non-Jewish reading.” The Jewish character Misha Weinstein in *Wait for Me* (Aleksandr Stolper, 1943) represents an advance in frankness about Jews’ participation in the war, but he is ultimately a token figure, similar to those representing different ethnic groups in Hollywood as well as in Soviet war movies. In general, she concludes, Soviet policy obliged filmmakers to universalize the Nazi victims; the rare instances in which Jews were portrayed as the Nazis’ special targets occur in the films about the camps outside the USSR.

Gershenson also explores some two dozen postwar projects and isolates several that seem worthy to be called Holocaust films. An obvious criterion would appear to be the extent to which the films frankly acknowledge the Jewish ethnicity of the characters and the way they represent the enormous catastrophes experienced by Jewish communities of the USSR. She describes several projects that foundered precisely because the filmmakers insisted on such candor. A few managed to be completed, though they were usually given limited releases. Of these, *Soldiers* by Aleksandr Ivanov (1956), Mikhail Kalik’s *Goodbye, Boys!* (completed in 1964 and released in 1966) and Valentin Vinogradov’s *Eastern Corridor* (1966) warrant serious reconsideration by scholars.

A brief review cannot do justice to the richness of the perspectives and evidence that Hicks and Gershenson offer. Equally important, however, is the way their discussions of these films have sometimes forthrightly, at other times only implicitly, raised provocative questions about what constitutes a Holocaust film. Their examples prove that, despite Soviet filmmakers’ brave attempts to challenge repressive Soviet policies about portraying the Holocaust, not all succeeded. Unfortunately, the Soviet state too often imposed strict limits on their ardor to convey at least something of the awful truth.

## Notes

1. Amir Weiner, *Making Sense of War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 208.
2. For example, Werth and Arad both discuss the important trials of captured Germans and their local collaborators at Krasnodar and Kharkov in July and December 1943 respectively. They note the impact that press reports of the trials had on Soviet audiences, yet neither cites the films made about the trials, though these also had an undeniable effect in conveying the nature of the crimes and their perpetrators to a mass Soviet public.
3. In fact, aside from Aleksander Askoldov’s *Commissar*, which, though set during the Russian Civil War (1918–1922), includes a curious proleptic scene of the murder of Soviet Jews during the Second World War, *Mamlock* is the only Russian or Soviet film Insdorf mentions. Completed in 1967 after significant revision by censors, *Commissar* was suppressed on orders

from the Communist Party. It was not publicly screened until the era of *perestroika*, twenty years later.

4. See David Schneer, *Through Soviet Jewish Eyes: Photography, War and the Holocaust* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 100–108.

5. Unfortunately, it appears that no reception studies were conducted at the time to assess audience reactions, or if they were, they have not yet been found.

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doi:10.1093/hgs/dcu031

***The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933–1945, vol. 2, Ghettos in German-Occupied Eastern Europe, edited by Geoffrey P. Megargee (series editor) and Martin Dean (volume editor) (Bloomington: Indiana University Press in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2012), parts A and B, 2,036 pp., 20 maps, 192 b/w illus., \$295.00, electronic version available.***

Increasingly, scholars are coming to the realization that each victim and survivor of the Holocaust experienced the Nazi genocidal project in a unique way and traveled his or her own path either to death or to survival. Nothing illustrates this more convincingly than the latest edition in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's series of encyclopedias of camps and ghettos. Until recently, the Holocaust in Eastern Europe has remained under-studied, though the region was home to the majority of victims. As a result of increased scholarly attention and the opening of archives in the former Soviet Union, the subject is beginning to come to the forefront of Holocaust studies. The massive two-volume set edited by Martin Dean and Geoffrey Megargee for the USHMM's Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos series focuses specifically on the ghettos of Nazi-occupied Eastern Europe. It stands without doubt as the definitive reference guide on this topic in the world today. This is not hyperbole, but simply a recognition of the meticulous collaborative research that went into assembling such a massive collection of information.

The volume is organized into two parts: volume A covers ghettos in incorporated German territories and Poland, while volume B focuses on ghettos in the occupied Soviet Union. The ghetto locations are indexed according to the regions established by the Nazis. An index and copious, detailed maps help users locate specific cities and villages if they are not familiar with Nazi administrative boundaries. The encyclopedia also includes introductory materials on Nazi ghetto policy, Jewish councils, and modes of survival, all of which help to situate the entries that follow. Brief historical introductions to the various Nazi territories of the occupied East also help to orient readers.